

Min-Maxing
My TRPG
Build in
Another
World
Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

3

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Schuld

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The Henderson Scale

- 9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.
- 1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.
- 0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.
- 0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. The party lacks an important skill or ability for the main story.
The handout wasn't lying with its recommendations.
- 0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. The party heads away from the objective to recover from a minor setback.
- 1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "I said, and I quote, 'You're going to need to win the first-place prize from the cooking contest to finish the campaign. Helping the chef who runs your party's favorite diner is your goal.' Why do none of you have a *single* point in cooking? Do you really think I'd go out of my way to endorse speccking into it on the handout if you could cruise by with your base stats?"
- 1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "So you thought you'd have the time to go search for quality ingredients, huh? That's all fine and dandy, and I can understand why you're upset that your plan failed and your dish is terrible. But can I ask why your first response is to try and sabotage the other entrants?"
- 1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "I'm begging you: please stop fighting over whether you should maim the competition for life or just peacefully destroy all their cooking utensils. Get it together and sort this out—and *no*, sneak attacking another PC is *not* considered negotiating."
- 1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "Fine, I'll admit that pulling out old character sheets for the other cooks so you guys couldn't just kill them was a bit childish of me. But that isn't any reason for you to start seriously planning to beat them in a fight. You know this is suicide, right?"
- 2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over: The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "You ruined the contest so thoroughly that your mediocre dish won because it was the only passable thing left. You made your cook's post-victory interview sound like a joke when he said, 'How'd I win? Well, I think it comes down to my love of cooking.' And now you want me to reward your rampage with a key item for the campaign?"

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Munchkin

1: A childish player who throws fits to try and gain every advantage they can for their PC.

2: A player who prefers to enjoy the act of building up a strong character over fleshing out their place in the world. These players staunchly uphold the rules on their quest for invincibility. Also known as a Japanese munchkin.



Early Summer of the Twelfth Year

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

With each passing day, the Sun God's worldly figure grew bolder: summer had arrived. Vast fields of wheat painted the land gold out to the ends of the horizon, where the vibrant green of the mountains beyond represented abundant life.

The world breathed as it always did, blissfully unaware of my agony, regret, and the terrible mistake that had brought these emotions on. Such was the way of things: whatever intentions the future Buddha held when he set me down on this land, the rest of existence knew precious little of it.

I was no main character. Even if I were to don the title of PC 1, I was still just another actor to round out the overarching plot of reality. No matter how meticulously my handouts had been written or how lengthy my character sheet became, a clattering set of cubes was all that laid between me and my untimely end.

The GM of this universe did not bend for a mere player; how could they when I had never done the same, sitting on that end of the table? At times, the world offered challenges that could not be overcome. To live was to bitterly elect the

lesser of any evils offered.

Thus, life abounded in spite of my remorse—and who was I to resent that? Besides, I had sworn to shoulder the burden of condemning myself for the rest of time.

I squeezed the reins of the carriage and took a deep breath to buffer my shriveling spirit. As my fingers tightened around the bridle, my ring gleamed in the sunlight. Where once there had only been bare metal, a blue gemstone shone with pride, as if in an attempt to cheer me up. This brilliant ice-blue prism was the last remnant of the girl I had been unable to save—the crystallization of my failure and sin.

As I had clutched the icy sapphire and wailed, Elisa had realized the mayhem was over, and in spite of her fear, she'd made her way over to embrace me. *She's growing up to be so kind*, I had thought.

When Elisa looked at the gemstone, she told me, "She wants to be with you." Perhaps she sensed something as a fellow changeling. Even after awakening to magic, my pitifully dull mensch eyes could not compare to the fey soul resting in my sister's body. Although I couldn't see the world as they did, I wondered for a moment if I would have been able to understand had I taken the svartalf's eyes.

After all that had been said and done, Helga's final wish had been for me to carry her memory with me, and I'd done so by fitting it on my lunar ring. Initially, Lady Agrippina had callously asked, "Ooh, how rare. Would you be interested in a sale?" After I had firmly refused her, she went on to say, "Very well, I shan't harm it, so let me play with it for a spell." In the end, she did the actual work of affixing the gem.

The madam could offer five years of waived tuition all she wanted; there was too much sentimental value for me to part with it.

As luck would have it, Helga's final memento went well with the lunar ring: spellcasting was easier now than ever before. The fatigue that came with mana expenditure (it was at times like these when I wished my blessing gave exact MP values) was barely noticeable, meaning I would be more tenacious in extended fights. With another of my ideal magic swordsman's flaws patched up, I couldn't be more confident.

Above all else, it gave me the will to fight: I would not snap so easily. Every time I glanced at my left hand, I was reminded of all that I was meant to fulfill.

Ah, what splendid weather. The skies went on forever without a cloud in sight. Staring up at the heavens, I felt as though I might fall into that endless blue.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine enjoyed pleasantly dry summers, and the cool climate of the region meant that the temperature was far from unbearable. There was no asphalt to bounce back extra heat, and the air was not so sickly humid that it felt like I was breathing liquid. While I missed many things from my past life, the need to hydrate every thirty minutes or risk stroke in the summer was not one of them.

Around this point in the year, the watchmen of my hometown were probably beginning their most intense season of training. With little farmwork to be done, the men would toss their hoes in exchange for swords and spears as they swung beneath the open sky. After working up a comfortable sweat, they would strip off their clothes and jump into the local river.

Had I been among them, I would have returned home to see cured meats being readied for storage. My mother would offer me fruits she had cooled in the well, and I would sit idly by, waiting for the caravans to roll into the canton with delicious ice candies.

I could only pray that everyone was doing well. With my sweet home of Konigstuhl far, far away, our three-month trek was finally nearing its end. Berylin, the glorious imperial capital of Rhine, was almost in sight.

Mine had been quite the journey. Slaying daemons in an abandoned mansion and bringing Helga's tale to a close had only been the start of my troubles. In fact, I'd been so busy that I had hardly found any time to steep in my guilt.

Rain or wind was reason enough for Lady Agrippina to grow weary of the road, and she frequently extended our stays at taverns at her whim without a care in the world. Furthermore, we often stopped by towns to stock up on supplies and whatnot; if *anything* caught her eye, she would gleefully waste whole days, saying, "The College can wait. They'll still be there by the time we arrive."

On one occasion, we found ourselves in a region famed for bookbinding.

When the good madam learned of a literary bazaar that was to take place, she threw all pretense of progress to the wayside and cooped up in the town for over a *week*. Her deranged love of reading was on full display: she tossed gold coins left and right for the rarest tomes as a matter of course, but also bought a fair share of shoddily bound booklets so long as the title piqued her interest.

Had I not pried her away, we surely would have been stuck in that city for three or four times as long. Rumor of a wealthy patron had spread quickly, and the books were literally coming to us by the time we'd left.

However, pushing along the immovable object that was my employer's ass had been far from my only hardship. I will take responsibility for the time that I'd borrowed a tome of combat magics and burned off my bangs, but the incident where Lady Agrippina whimsically dragged me into a canteen was absolutely not my fault. I had been forced to beat down countless drunkards with my bare fists to protect them from the wrath of the terrible magus at my back. I'd been so close to screaming at her that such activities were not part of a servant's duty.

Other than that, I'd gotten over my hesitance to interact with Ursula and Lottie...but the other alfar that tagged along were becoming a problem. Their most recent bout of troublesome mischief was when they'd tied my hair into a million tiny braids that looked like the world's worst dreadlocks. Even with my Unseen Hands working at full throttle, it took a full calendar day to undo everything; regardless, I'd walked around with a hideous perm for a few days afterwards.

Speaking of notable events, there was one I couldn't ignore...

"Mr. Brother!"

"What is it, Elisa? Didn't I tell you that coming out to the coach box is dangerous?"

...Helga's influence had apparently awoken my sister to her magical powers.

The carriage was rolling along at quite the brisk pace, and falling off would have been comparable to a one-man car accident. Actually, the risk of being trampled by our steeds or run over by the wheels meant it was probably *more* dangerous.

No normal seven-year-old would be able to open the door and skirt the outside of the stagecoach all the way to the coachbox. They'd need to be able to leap through space-time or fly through the sky—Elisa could do *both*.

“Miss Master said to take a break. She said you can't focus for very long.”

My sister casually floated over to hug my neck from behind, but her lower half was lazily lagging behind, *inside* the frame of the carriage. This was the natural talent of all changelings: they could manipulate their bodies to exist outside the absolutes of physical reality.

Elisa had less awoken to magic and more remembered what it meant to be a changeling. One morning, I'd found her floating in her sleep, which scared the living daylights out of me. I had flashed back to a certain classic film; I nearly ran out to the closest church to tag in a priest before the projectile vomit started flying.

Ever since, Elisa had begun floating around like a stringless kite, touching only the things that she wanted to touch and phasing through everything else. If every child like her survived to adulthood, the world's spies would be out of a career.

All that being said, Lady Agrippina explained that she was still only half awake (like when first rising from bed), and her training as a mage had yet to begin. Her current tricks were as natural for a changeling as walking was for mensch, or swimming for fish.

This only meant that Elisa was finally nearing the starting line. Her adorably poor command of language and plebeian diction clearly betrayed her lack of education. Without fundamentals like the palatial tongue solidly in hand, she had no hope of studying magic. Lady Agrippina let her float as she pleased to prevent a bottled-up explosion of arcane power, and often tasked me with overseeing her meditation to heighten her concentration.

Elisa was eager to learn, and her efforts were beginning to bear fruit, but her clumsy tongue was ill-suited for fanciful language. Looking back, I'd struggled with this too: while Margit had taught me a popular variant of the palatial tongue, it had come with a distinctly embarrassing add-on... *Nope, enough of that. That memory isn't good for my mental health.*

Although Lady Agrippina unhelpfully compared Elisa's progress to mine (all I had to do was click a button, after all), I was genuinely thankful for how patiently she taught my sister. Tutors who could motivate students and stuck with them through thick and thin were a rare breed.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder why the woman had been playing the part of an actual guardian as of late. She had clearly thought us a bother when we'd first met, and who knew what kind of trouble we'd get into next?

Speaking of which, Elisa's awakening brought its own host of problems. Blind rage had nearly turned me into a murderer of seven when a group of slavers offered to purchase our "exotic good" (the only reason they survived was because Lady Agrippina graciously tended to their wounds for me). On another occasion, a merry band of alfar had excitedly tried to whisk her away to be their new playmate.

We'd drilled it into Elisa that she was not to play with people or entities that she didn't know unless she asked us for permission first. Although this rule had worked so far, I had no idea when the next ordeal would rear its head.

Now that I thought about it, the Imperial College of Magic was, as one might imagine, a densely clustered gathering of all things arcane. Thus far, Elisa had seen a sizable chunk of trouble out in the boonies—how bad was it going to be in the mecca of magic?

A cold sweat ran down my spine, but seeing my adorable baby sister tilt her head and ask, "What's wrong?" soothed my weary soul.

"Nothing at all," I answered. I would not break—not until I could win a happy future for Elisa—and I would carry on to forever repent for what I had done to Helga.

[Tips] With a population of sixty thousand, the imperial capital would be on the smaller end of urban centers in modern Japan, but is the tenth largest city in Rhine. Although the majority of its citizens are aristocrats who reside there for political reasons, a tenth are affiliated with the College in some way—no small number for a city of this size.

From a hill, I spotted a metropolis sprawling out on the edge of the horizon. Emotion swelled from the depths of my heart and I could feel myself trembling: *Berylin!*

The city stood proudly alone in the middle of a vast field, announcing its presence for all to see. Majestic walls fully encircled the town and streets radiated from its center. The perfectly organized network of roads was picturesque—the sort of thing you’d gawp at when the GM laid out the bird’s-eye view at the table.

Most impressive of all was the lofty imperial palace that towered toward the heavens. I was no architect, but the chalk-white walls dotted with countless spires that guarded the castle proper were imposing to an overwhelming degree. Yet, counterintuitively, it was not overbearing: the pressure it exerted was a form of honest beauty—a monumental ode to the greatness of the Empire that had constructed it.

So glorious and dignified was the building that its reflection in water seemed to soar through the skies. No one could cast their eyes upon this marvel without internalizing the greatness of he who commanded its halls.

This was imperial sovereignty given form. It served to instill pride in those who served such an impressive ruler while sending a message to those abroad that the Empire was not to be trifled with. Those who wrote off extravagant palaces as wasteful spending would surely change their tune if they gazed upon the Rhinian capital. Architectural dominance on its own could serve to preserve national security.

Smaller branch castles the size of whole forts guarded every cardinal direction. Each and every one was painted to please the eyes, blending everything together into one massive art piece.

Furthermore, buildings sprang up all along the sixteen major roads beaming out from the central palace. All in all, the circle made by Berylin’s borders was breathtakingly perfect. Smaller streets intertwined like a spider’s web, and one look at the chic burnt bricks that paved the alleyways was enough to appreciate the untold effort that had gone into its urban planning.

Billows of smoke rose from every corner of the city; if that wasn’t enough of a

sign of life, the tightly packed walkways full of people and carriages that looked like a dark carpet from afar certainly were.

This was *fantasy*—the otherworldly cityscape I’d long pined for.

“Oh my god... This is incredible!”

We’d stopped by bustling towns on our way here, but the largest among them was home only to five to ten thousand people. I had never visited the capital of any major region, and my tempered expectations only fanned the flames of my excitement.

When the people of the Showa era left their middling towns—the Okayamas of the world—for the capital, this was surely how they had felt. A burning desire to walk those streets took hold of me; what had once been a task solely for Elisa’s sake had become something I wanted of my own volition.

“Wear a sign that reads UNCULTURED SWINE in tall red letters around your neck, why don’t you.”

Lady Agrippina’s weariness flew straight into my brain, but I basked in wonder all the same. What did I care? I was a hick.

I would have loved to give form to my admiration with a photograph, if I could. I had once watched with cynicism as my peers traded in their eyes for smartphone cameras, but now I sorely missed the presence of that glowing slate.

I wish I could show everyone back home...

“So big!” Still acting as a living scarf, Elisa gasped in wonder.

“It really is! Elisa, we’re going to live there from now on!”

“Really?!” she said, kicking her feet in excitement. “The big castle?!”

“Well,” I said, ignoring the pain of her knees slamming into my back, “the castle might not be...”

“The College is in the southern branch of the palace.”

“What?! For real?!” ...*For real?!*

Immediately after receiving this gobsmacking morsel of news, I turned my

attention to the southern fort. In contrast to the white palace, the College's walls were an intimidating black. Looking again, I noticed that every other minor castle had tons of foot traffic; this one was far less popular. Presumably there weren't as many people who had business there. I was in awe—soon, I would be one of the few knocking on those gates.

“Krahenschanze is the southern fort of the palace and home to the College. There are wards to the east and west of the main campus, and quite the sizable underground structure containing the library and laboratories. It is every bit the center of magecraft you might expect.”

“Whoa...”

Hearing the madam run through one textbook fantasy trapping after another skyrocketed my excitement. All twelve of my years had been spent facing the harsh reality of life, so the overdose of anticipation was starting to mess with my brain. I couldn't wait to walk around like a tourist—surely they had to have museums and landmarks in the dozens, right?

“Well, I suppose with all the branches and local leaders scattered about the world, there are certain fields in which the highest authority lies elsewhere. Still, no other location can claim the College's preeminence. Heh, fitting that this vain castle stands in the capital of vanity.”

“Capital of vanity?”

“I may clarify one day, should time allow. Gawking is well and good, but I'd like to get going soon. I've sent a letter stating we will arrive by the day's end, and failure to do so would be terribly unpleasant.”

Although I wanted to dwell on what she'd said and continue soaking up the dreamlike view, I had no choice but to comply. Besides, Elisa was raring to go, and I wanted to escape to the coachbox to prevent any further attacks on my back. *Ow, ow, please stop.*

I pushed down my desire to zoom forward at full speed and slowly began rolling the carriage downhill. We followed the southern trail, bound for an entrance stemming from one of the main roads: Krahentor, the south-southeastern gate.

This gate was the primary passageway for all College affiliates. Unlike the major gates stationed in each cardinal direction, it did not close at night so long as one had a particular pass. Apparently most of the minor gates served similar roles for each of the branch castles.

Furthermore, the southeastern part of the city was known as the Mages' Corridor, as it was filled with personal laboratories, student housing, small lecture halls, and even private schools. Magic was a dangerous field of study, so it made sense that all these experimental locations would be situated far from the city center.

That was fine—no, really, I understood. There were tons of spells that could cause catastrophic loss of life with explosions and what have you. I didn't at all mind being in the area. In fairness, the tomes Lady Agrippina had given me to study were laden with so many dangerous spells that I'd gone to confirm that I was reading the book right more times than I had fingers and toes.

Krahentor was split a ways off of the main road. A garrison of guards in grand plate armor oversaw the traffic. There was no one to watch the foot soldiers, but they didn't so much as slouch—ample evidence that these military men prided themselves on their work far more than their rural counterparts.

Still, what commanded the most attention wasn't them: it was the large three-headed dog standing guard with them. While it was the same size as a large household breed, the sight of a menacing mystic life-form was thoroughly intimidating.

“Stop fidgeting or you'll draw suspicion. There's no call to fret over a mere triskele. It may be an artificial life-form, but it makes for a loyal companion. Why, it's practically a harmless puppy without any orders to attack.”

What the hell are you people making in the College?! I don't know of any puppies like this!

Lady Agrippina gave me the verbal whip for balking at this horrendous creature, so I tried my best to straighten up. Despite the intimidating air about them all, the guard that came up was kind enough to politely ask for my entry pass rather than browbeat me for it. I handed him the ticket the madam had entrusted to me and the man held it next to something similar in make.

Suddenly, it glowed blue; the ticket was evidently laced with some kind of magic.

I squinted to see that the blue light was spelling out my employer's name and title. Not only did the ticket keep track of traffic in and out of the city, but it served as an identification card to boot.

This was far higher tech than I expected. The adoption of advanced mystic technology meant that entry under a false identity was nigh impossible. Unlike us common rabble, the members of high society must have had IDs with built-in measures to counter political espionage.

"Clear," the guard said. "Enjoy your stay in the capital."

"Thank you very much," I said.

For a moment, I wondered if I was supposed to tip him, but he quickly marched back to his post. It seemed more likely that they, like the Japanese police, were barred from receiving extraneous donations.

"Here we are in the Grand Old Capital. Such a pity that they came up with the moniker themselves."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. The doors had opened without anyone else's help to welcome us in. Red brick structures filled my vision. There wasn't a shabby building in sight; stylish signs hung at every turn to catch my eye.

I had already been impressed before entering: the rutted road leading here had been made of paved stone so impeccably packed that a razor would hardly fit in the cracks. But seeing the pristine interior was something else. The magical suspension of our carriage had absorbed almost all of the bumps in our journey so far, but we were practically gliding over the streets of the capital.

People walked to and fro: some looked to be students, and those in dignified robes were surely the magia that taught them. Seeing all the different shapes and forms of the passersby was so entertaining that I could have people-watched all day.

However, what commanded the most attention lay dead ahead. At the end of the straight path leading forward were the black walls of the Imperial College. Grave yet resplendent, the silent behemoth was every bit as imposing as the

magias' castle ought to be. I respected it as Elisa's sanctuary from abuse, but without her circumstances I would have thought it to be the final bastion of a demon lord.

On the hill, I had thought I was at the height of excitement—yet with this magnificent place now so close, my fervor exploded like never before.

[Tips] The College often creates artificial life-forms to suit its interests. However, these are considered to be categorically different from wild beasts with the capacity for magic; the primary determining factor is whether or not it can breed without a magus's assistance.

The capital was so full of towering buildings that I got a crick in my neck doing my best country bumpkin impression. No amount of training could prepare me for a whole day's worth of staring upward.

Can you blame me? Discovering a new location always sets a player's heart aflutter. I was like a GM who'd just bought the latest supplement, ready to run through a new campaign with the usual crowd at a moment's notice.

"Wait," I said in realization. "Where are the guards?"

Our carriage had pulled up to the College, but the gate to Krahenschanze was wide open. I checked both sides of the entrance, but it was barren of guardsmen and three-headed dogs alike. All I could find was a bored scribe sitting at a desk on the edge of the moat, waiting for his next customer.

However, upon further inspection, I realized a spell had been cast on the gate itself. The fact that someone of my level could notice its presence meant that it likely was made with an unimaginable investment of mana. If I had to guess...

"If anyone tries to pass through these arches without the proper ticket, a barrier will instantly send a report to the local guard. We have no need for someone to dawdle in front of a doorway all day. Besides, who wants to pay for labor?"

The magia employed a truly fitting form of security. I think I might have been impressed, had my liege forgone her final sentence.

As we crossed the bridge, I noticed that our carriage was drawing a fair few eyes from the foot traffic, but they quickly lost interest, as none recognized the Stahl emblem. In a town like Berylin, visits from nobility must have been a dime a dozen.

“Ah, yes. It’s good to be back after twenty-odd years away.”

I froze. *Twenty* years? Lady Agrippina had indeed told us her journey was long, and that we were a means to secure an end to her fieldwork. But what on earth could she have done to be sent away for two decades?! I still didn’t know what she specialized in, so there was a chance that she had some incredible hypothesis that took generations of hands-on research to prove, but I sincerely doubted it.

While I wouldn’t bat an eye at an archaeologist or folklorist spending twenty years on the road, the madam’s pragmatism was as far from these romantic fields of study as I could imagine. Perhaps it could be explained if she had some need to observe mystic beasts to crib from for some groundbreaking new homunculus. But if she’d been wandering the Empire as an indoorsy scholarly type...the thought of what she’d done suddenly struck me with fear. Whatever it was, getting the dean of her cadre to exile her for twenty years was no small feat.

Our vehicle slipped into the driveway—structured like a modern hotel’s—as if we were gliding on silk and stopped just as smoothly. Just as I’d practiced, I hopped off the coachbox and extended the landing steps before opening the carriage door.

Simple tasks like these were alien to members of the aristocracy. Thus, they employed innumerable servants, assigning each a menial chore to specialize in. Sure, it created new job openings, but my commoner brain couldn’t help but wonder if the pompousness of it all grated on my colleagues as it did on me.

“Madam, we have arrived.” Stating the obvious and taking the hand of Lady Agrippina, who was dressed in a convincingly noble way, to help her down was all a part of my duties. She didn’t need my hand to step off the carriage, of course, but the assertion of social dominance was necessary more often than not.

Everyone here was desperate to keep up airs. Beauty was a blade, clothing was armor, and the rules of social etiquette defined the terrain. Skill with all three was the bare minimum one needed in their arsenal to resist being rent asunder by the unseen blade of the peerage's regard as it made its rounds (Lady Agrippina's analogy made it sound like we were all trapped inside a blender set to "puree")...or so I had been taught.

Until now, high society had been far out of my reach. My feeble, impoverished, commoner mind had envisioned a garden with a host of genteel mademoiselles giggling from behind luxurious fans. However, the reality depicted a battlefield where authority ground against authority as players in this wicked game groped for footholds to weaken their opponents—not that I could truly see what was going on. Still, my friends who had undertaken postgraduate studies in my past life had told me stories of the social wars in academia; it seemed that humans were ever humans.

To this end, Lady Agrippina's preparations were flawless. Magic wove her hair into an elegant chignon at all hours of the day—*Does the concept of resource management even exist in her mind?*—like a masterwork of sculpted silver. From up close, I could see the ungodly precision in the embroidery decorating the scarlet silk of her off-shoulder gown. The like colors made its presence subtle; no doubt this understated palette was part of her wealthy sensibilities.

Elisa followed suit. She must have received a very strict lesson, as she walked out with noble grace, hardly letting her feet leave the ground. This was a far cry from the rowdy, stubby toddling of the recent past. Clearly, her hard work had paid off.

Although she still looked uncomfortable in the clothes the madam had tailored for her a few cities back, Elisa looked absolutely adorable in them. Robes were a signifier of magia, and gowns were reserved for the upper class; instead, she wore a white blouse laden with frills, a hooded cape, and a corset skirt that wrapped around her waist. She continued putting one foot clad in a long leather boot in front of the other as she entered the public eye without incident.

I had spent half an hour tying up the golden locks she'd inherited from our mother. Her gently flowing hair had a nymphish charm—both literally and

figuratively. Putting it lightly, she was God's gift to mankind.

At first, I'd been confounded by the exceedingly contemporary design—I think this style had been popularized online for its virgin-killing properties—but the seamstress who created it went on to explain that it was in vogue among the middle class to wear touched-up versions of simple farming clothes.

I didn't really get it. I didn't need to. Our little princess was the cutest in the world.

Me, you ask? I was dressed plain and neat in a dark doublet and slacks. The only thing worth mentioning was that my hair had grown long enough to warrant me pushing it behind my head. At any rate, a servant's job was not to stick out. My place was three steps behind the madam, away from public attention.

Well, there was *one* other thing. The capital forbade all but the aristocracy and their bodyguards from carrying weapons, so I'd hidden away the fey karambit in my sleeve. Not for any reason, mind you, except perhaps for fashion's sake.

"Now then, be a darling and make sure not to stray too far," Lady Agrippina thought. Perhaps she had gotten so lazy that moving her mouth was a chore.

"Yes, madam," I said, in the humblest palatial accent I could manage. Unlike usual, it was actually time to work as a noble's steward.

My liege took Elisa by the hand and I followed in their wake three paces behind. This was exactly as Lady Agrippina had taught us. I made every effort to look sharp as we entered the College, but my heart was admittedly taken by the architecture all around us—even the most well-preserved structures of Victorian Europe weren't this grand.

As the center of imperial magic, a cutting-edge research facility, and an institute of learning to produce more talent, I had expected the main hall to be teeming with people. Yet I stepped inside to find a tranquil interior done up top to bottom in black, occasionally broken up by some small accent.

This was a fortress; in dire situations it was meant to serve as a stronghold against an attack. Yet for some reason, the entrance was fashioned like a large

atrium, similar to those of ancient banks. Sunlight flooded in from the skylight to bathe the wooden reception desk in a glow so holy that it felt wrong to approach carelessly. As a final cherry on top, the staff waiting for us were so handsome that I swear they must have been hired on appearances alone.

The scene was enough to grasp why the madam had called this a vain castle in the capital of vanity.

As the pillar of the Trialist Empire's grip on magic, swaths of outsiders came and went through this reception area to be ushered in for classes or meetings with famed lecturers and professors alike. Some whom I presumed to be students stood at the desk with scrunched-up faces, and I could see bureaucrats going about their business with bundles of documents in hand. This was the hub for paperwork, not learning.

However, my master was here in spite of her official position as a researcher for the explicit purpose of greeting the dean of her cadre. As a former university student myself, I initially wondered why she didn't visit the head of her school directly. Alas, this too was another quirk of nobility: it was more becoming to announce one's intent to visit beforehand.

Truly, these were strange creatures bound by prestige and rules. Those who coveted their luxury alone would be horrified to find themselves living this sort of life. I wondered if there were any nouveau riche types that bought noble titles; if there were, how long did they last?

My mind drifted to all sorts of unknowns, but Lady Agrippina paid me no mind as she proceeded to the counter. Yet just as she prepared to state her business, a gust of wind tore through the hall. The tempest's message was clear: the methuselah had no need for paperwork.

[Tips] Those who need potions or miscellaneous assistance in a mystic field usually take their business to one of the private laboratories in the Mages' Corridor. However, these clients are usually public servants—laymen in extraordinary circumstances will more often ask for help via the suggestion boxes placed at the gates leading into Krahenschanze. As a result, there are scribes stationed by every entrance to the College.

The Imperial College—the heart of all things magic in the Trialist Empire and home port to all magia—was in the middle of an endless war that had begun at its founding. The question was as simple as it was comically childish: which field of study was best? Ludicrous as it was that the brightest minds in the Empire got along worse than toddlers, the internecine battle had deep roots.

Such was to be expected. The institution's origins lay with the founding of the Empire itself. Mages keen on research and development had been plucked from every one of the component states of the greater Rhinian nation. Their sole purpose was to create a new source of power that would maintain the nation's stability and expand her borders. To that end, the gifted were not left to roam free, but shackled by the pride that came with systems and ranks.

And proud they were. Five hundred years ago, there had been no distinction between magus and mage. Every accomplished mage knew only of their local peers, and were sure that the Truth conformed to their view of the world. Had their arrogance taken physical form, it would surely have breached the sky and touched the heavens.

As the scheme of apprenticeship bound mages together with the blood of technique, cliques rapidly formed like twin and triplet brothers. At their heads were invariably geniuses of absolute authority—after all, those who studied wished to do so under a great master. So long as their character was salvageable, the greatest minds were orbited by disciples. In turn, they became the basis of whole factions.

Drawn in by the state's promise of funding and facilities, those who prided themselves as the cream of the crop gathered to prove their mettle. How could a crowd of this sort ever hope to get along?

You would sooner see a Red Sox fan sitting shoulder to shoulder in beatific brotherhood with a Yankees fan, deep in their cups as they basked under the glow of a sports bar flat-screen, bidding each other a safe journey home at the sound of last call. At worst, the butting of heads at the College could devolve into a bloodbath.

And did. Often.

The Cadre Struggles, as they were known, were a series of unfathomably obnoxious battles without beginning or end.

Shortly after the College's founding, seven particularly talented mages—as mentioned, the system for denoting exceptional figures as “magia” had yet to be invented—rose up above all others. They staked their claim, declaring that their way was *the* way, and gave birth to the major schools of thought.

Each school was a place for their respective members to strive for their vision of perfection. With seven whole answers, there was clearly not going to be any consensus—the factions of the College came into being in the perilous state of seven-way mutual condemnation. Damage caused by the glove-throwing one-on-one sessions of mortal combat that emerged among heated nobles was a cute trifle in comparison to the mountains of casualties the mages left in their wake.

Five centuries later, the great founders had long since been buried, but their struggle lived on. Sentient life was beyond help no matter the world, it seemed.

In the present day, the balance of power had reached a sort of equilibrium under the umbrella of the Five Great Pillars. The passage of time had worn the rugged individualist mages into the loosely cooperative magia, gathered around outstanding individuals to form cadres. This was a necessary measure: research was a boiling cauldron, melting funds into the essence of knowledge. A figurehead of respectable pedigree was prerequisite to acquiring a steady stream of government grants.

With explosive growth and noble titles came irreversible change. The melting pot of philosophies had once dictated the magia's battles; now, a select few moved their pieces for the good of the factions they ruled.

The deans of the five key cadres each bore the torch of one of the seven original schools of thought. They welcomed smaller like-minded groups into their flock and wielded their absolute authority in an everlasting competition with the other deans.

What made the present situation so precarious was that each of these leading magia were masters of their craft. Naturally, the Empire did not enjoy overseeing a cold war between necessarily eccentric, preening personalities

that could each individually wipe whole districts off the map.

Every emperor to take the throne found that mediating the magia's lethally bad blood was every bit as stressful as foreign diplomacy. Coupled with the heavy responsibility of the national budget, one could see why the members of the three imperial houses referred to the throne as the "seat of torture." Every few generations, the reigning monarch declared their intent to abolish the whole institution in a fit of rage; they then weighed the College's value on a scale against the trouble it caused and abandoned their dream like clockwork.

Setting aside the woes of imperial rule, Agrippina's chosen ideology was that of the School of Daybreak, whose doctrine was thus: *Let magic dispel ignorance and bring bounty to the world*. The faction's idealism spat in the face of the muddy conflict they had long participated in, and they prided themselves on contributing to society in practical ways.

The School of Daybreak's greatest breakthroughs included the discovery of a method to transport mana beyond the bounds of space, and a long-range communication device that could instantly transcribe a faraway person's thoughts. Popular in every region with all sorts of guilds and associations, they were even able to employ the help of adventurers unbound to the state of Rhine.

Naturally, Agrippina's chosen cadre was one heralded by a fellow Daybreak thinker. There were only Five Great Pillars, and the Leizniz cadre she cast her lot with was chief among them. What was more, Leizniz had not succeeded her cadre from a mentor. No, Lady Leizniz herself had founded the cadre two hundred years prior, overcoming ruthless clashes to lead her faction to dominance.

You may wonder what kind of woman this Leizniz was to tirelessly lead a party as magnificent as hers for so long. She was bold yet delicate. She was open-minded and considerate. She was a peerless genius that effortlessly shared her depth of knowledge in ways that were easy to understand. She was a friend to the weak—a philanthropist of the highest degree.

As wondrous as this description is, these would be the words of someone from her own cadre. What then, you may ask, were the opinions of those

outside it?

Leizniz was a godless backslider addicted to novelty. She was a sycophant more suited to politics than scholarship. She was a psychopath that used her silver tongue to cut down all who crossed her. She was a waste of talent, allotted all the wrong traits to create the perfect nuisance. And lastly, she was a filthy vitality glorifier.

They say merit and demerit are two sides of the same coin, but her divisiveness was in a league of its own.

You may further wonder what lineage could have produced this two-hundred-year-old monster, and the answer might shock you. Leizniz was a mensch—or at least, she *had been*.

A glacial gale tore through the majestic entrance hall of Krahenschanze. With the heat of imminent summer gone, the air was icy enough to crack the skin. The public officials visiting on business fled the scene, and the students filling out paperwork erected barriers in a fit of panic. Some who were used to this sort of disturbance casually sauntered off with peevish looks.

The woman at the center of the frigid tempest was none other than the renowned prodigy of the most powerful cadre in the Empire: Magdalena von Leizniz.

A layer of frost settled on Agrippina's ever-present conceptual barrier. Despite the worrying cracking sound it made, she had a dauntless smile—nay, she twisted her gorgeous features into a hideous sneer. Yet she was the pinnacle of civility as she graciously bowed to the *wraith* fading into being.

"I humbly present the most affectionate of greetings to mark my return. May I offer this courtesy to you, my esteemed master, Professor Magdalena von Leizniz?"

"You *dare* to speak?" The wraith's beautiful voice was bathed in cold fury; she dragged her words up from the icy depths of hell.

This short exchange was more than enough to see the strife between the researcher and the dean she swore allegiance to.

[Tips] While the cadres of the Imperial College are not legally recognized entities, distinguished professors are granted nobility by the imperial crown. However, even then, they are not allotted territory—they are simply given a stipend and told to carry themselves as a member of the upper class.

Still, continuous contribution can lead to increased awards; should a magus serve the Empire with enough zeal, they can rise in rank to the point of earning an estate. The dream of rising to political prominence is no mere dead letter.

This world was no stranger to cock-and-bull tales of phantoms and specters, told to put ice in the veins of children and the excessively gullible, but geists, as they were known, were verifiably real. I knew nothing about the rigorous theoretical explanation for their manifestation, but the gist of a geist was that a strong will at the end of one's mortal life could imprint their existence on the very world.

Oftentimes, they exerted all of their magical power in their final moment, surpassing all limits to concentrate all of the mana they *would have* produced in a normal lifetime in a single instant. As a consequence, such apparitions were incredibly strong, without variation.

Initially, I had thought this was absurd. Yet there were stories about common farm girls turning into spirits capable of cursing the entire bloodlines of those who had broken their hearts, and others about powerless daughters of ruined noble houses turning whole castles into uninhabitable fortresses of blight. Faced with undeniable evidence of supernatural power, I could no longer write this off as an old wives' tale.

I had come across these anecdotes many years ago: I had been in the canton's church with a few other local children, and they had begged the priest to tell us a fun story instead of a standard sermon. To this day, I had absolutely no idea why he decided this bone-chilling array of ghost stories would be anything in the realm of "fun" for a group of small kids. Perhaps he'd meant to teach us not to do anything that would cause others to hold a grudge, but there was no reason to offer the lesson in such bloodcurdling form. Frankly, I thought it more likely that he simply had been waiting to share the stories with anyone he

could.

Thinking back, the priest had gone on to note that there were beings even *more* terrifying than the ghastly geists: *wraiths*. Wraiths arose from the same circumstances as their lesser cousins—deep regret or hatred branded their souls onto reality at the brink of death—but there was a catch.

Wraiths were only born from the greatest of mages. The geistification process amplified common folk to ludicrous levels; what, then, would happen if the deceased commanded an enormous sea of mana? A look to the past sufficed to answer: when a court magus in another land had been executed on suspicion of assassination, the resulting wraith had reduced the state to a mountain of corpses in seven days.

Man, the world is a scary place.

Still, geists weren't a problem so long as one kept one's viscous whirlpool of ugly emotions at arm's length. As a farm boy growing up in a god-fearing neck of the woods—faithful to the reputable Harvest Goddess, no less—and surrounded by friendly neighbors, I had been sure to go my whole life without seeing one.

Until today, that is. Icy gales swirled into a tornado as soon as she appeared, bringing the mere idea of warmth to its knees. The dry heat of early summer shivered out of existence as a layer of frost settled on surfaces that were never meant to freeze over. Even Lady Agrippina's force field, which was literally the concept of protection given form—truthfully, it was so unfair that I couldn't begin comprehending it—was covered in crystals of ice.

The wraith was death personified, and yet her beauty was, in many ways, the sort of thing that made your whole body tremble. Her silhouette had a womanly roundness to it, and the gentle droop of her large eyes paired nicely with the well-defined bridge of her nose. Her plump lips were precisely the right size to balance with the rest of her features, and her voluminous brown hair was extravagantly decorated with stylish gems fit for the upper class.

From her appearance, the semitranslucent woman seemed to be in her late teens or early twenties. Although her drooping gown did its utmost to mask her sensual charm, it did little to hide the grace present in her voluptuous figure.

Had she been alive, this gorgeous beauty would know no rest as suitor after hopeful suitor would have vied for her hand—at least, so long as she stopped radiating enough arcane pressure to make their legs give out.

The only reason I was still in my right mind was because Elisa was by my side. Like the episode in Helga’s winter storm, I expanded my Unseen Hands as much as I could manage and used several layers to create an impromptu barrier to protect my sister—who was staring at the Hands blankly, unable to keep up.

Unfortunately, an inexperienced mage’s shield amounted to little more than improv. Layered as they were, the Hands let air whistle through the cracks, and I couldn’t totally insulate us from the gust. But it was a brother’s duty to try, and I hugged Elisa tight in order to defend her from as much of the biting cold as I could.

I needed to get my act together before Elisa’s mind could catch up to what was happening. The madam had said that my sister’s awakening now left her at risk of blowing up whenever she came across undue magical stimulus. No matter how much the terror and cold caused me to quake in my boots, I had to stand firm for her sake.

I squeezed her face into my chest so she wouldn’t be able to see behind me as I exposed my back to the wind. Wearing summer threads in temperatures that made winter nights feel climate-controlled was excruciating—seriously, what on earth had my master done? How had she managed to get someone in a position as important as her school’s *dean* to pop off without any hesitation?

“My, my,” Lady Agrippina said. “How good it is to see you in the best of spirits. Pray tell, how do you do? I take it that you must have had a wonderful streak of fortune as of late.”

For the love of all that’s holy, don’t spur her on! I still haven’t had the heart to use all the experience points I earned from Helga and the ogre! If this whirlwind gets any worse, my crappy barrier might as well not even be here! You know this isn’t supposed to happen, right?! I’m not supposed to be able to see clumps of hand-shaped frost outlining magical force fields!

“Oh, could it be? May I be so forward as to claim the honor of being the cause for your jubilation? I could think of nothing more delightful than for that to be

the case.”

I will admit that in many a past session, I’d talked all kinds of smack to those that were far stronger than me. At times this led to compromise and at others it caused the party to wipe, but I ended up crumpled up on the floor with laughter nearly every time. But seeing the scene unfold in a situation where I didn’t have extra lives was *not* funny.

“After ignoring my letters while penning frivolous replies of your own for longer than I care to remember, *this* is the greeting you give me? Truly, *Agrippina du Stahl?*”

Seeing a gorgeous person drowning in pure rage was even scarier than usual. Although the beauty mark under the wraith’s eye resembled the gentle teardrop of a kind woman, her features distorted to make her look like a demon of hatred.

For the first time in a while, I was on the verge of sobbing like a baby. As of late, I’d begun feeling like a PC that had finished the prologue and promptly been thrown into the endgame campaign material. I wanted *at least* four more party members I could spec out from scratch to be shameless meta-slaves before trying to wail on an enemy like this.

“Oh, my dearest master, you are much too good to me. What joy it brings to know that you would so benevolently remember my name after leaving me on the roadside for twenty years.”

“Do tell, however might I hope to forget you? No, not a day goes by when you leave my mind—and neither do the countless grievances from the librarians you tossed my way, nor the headache-inducing details of the report I had to write on the events that took place on the day of that crucial lecture.”

On one side was a smile wicked enough to hang on a wall; on the other was a cold expression that ought to be in the dictionary next to the entry for “silent rage.”



The two stood off without a word. Just when I finally began weighing the cost of tagging Lottie in, the glacial air warmed. Perhaps that isn't exactly correct: the room *instantaneously* returned to the pleasant summer temperature it had been, as if we'd switched scenes. The frozen wasteland was back to business as usual, and the frost on my and the madam's barriers vanished.

All that remained was the tingly sensation of stepping into a heated room after braving a blizzard. The disappearance of collateral effects suggested that she'd been using true magic, as opposed to a cantrip. Otherwise, the air would have taken time to warm back up, and the frost would have needed to melt on its own.

The difference in mana costs between hedge magic and true magic was comparable to a fuel-efficient sedan and a high-end sports car. The fact that the dean had used the latter to summon a natural disaster without breaking a sweat made her an absolute monster. How much experience would I need to spend to face something like that head-on?

"I'm so sorry, little ones. This *imbecile* made me lose my composure. Did I frighten you?"

The wraith had finally noticed me and Elisa, and she slipped past my employer to crouch down and speak to us at eye level. Then, she hugged us with her transparent yet strangely warm arms. I was already hugging Elisa, but she took both of us and buried us in what I now realized was a prodigious chest.

Huh? What? You can touch stuff? Wait, why are you warm?! And soft?! And you smell nice too?!

"Ha! Oh, Master, ever one for jokes, I see."

"Silence."

Thoughts of every kind bounced and slammed into one another in my head, and in my state of confusion, the annoyingly prominent call of *Boobies!* won out, drowning out everything else. While my mental faculties were still bugged, the stunning wraith scooped us up and decided that it was time for tea.

[Tips] Under imperial census law, resurrected individuals are considered

deceased and forfeit all assets to be inherited. While they themselves also lose the right to inherit their kinsmen's fortunes, the property they acquire postmortem is guaranteed by the state.

Several minutes later, I wound up in a room in the College—that was about as precise as I could get. Around me were subdued yet unabashedly expensive furnishings: photorealistic paintings, a sofa stuffed with the finest down, and a matching table embellished with all sorts of unnecessary engravings. It was clear to see that this was a parlor room meant to entertain the most dignified of company.

Someone like me who'd just fallen off the back of a turnip truck had no excuse relaxing in a place like this. To make matters worse, Elisa and I had been dragged along to sit by one of the five most important people in this entire institution. What was I supposed to do? That wasn't rhetorical—what the hell was I meant to do?

I could guess as to why we were in the room itself: the glares of the receptionists had rapidly approached a tipping point. I could tell from their expressions alone that they'd been ready to put an end to their obnoxious visitors, noble titles and professorships be damned. As the first barrier to entry into the magia castle, they were far from powerless poster children chosen for their good looks, and their angry gazes were nothing to scoff at.

No, my concern was the fact that the hostess of our meeting had taken Elisa onto her lap to pet her head. On top of that, I had no clue why she was pulling me straight into her left breast.

Don't think I forgot about you, madam. My employer (and just as pertinently, Elisa's teacher) was sitting across from us with a smug grin, sipping at her tea with an uncaring "Yum."

"And?" the wraith demanded. "Explain yourself."

"Whatever might there be to explain?" Lady Agrippina said, her tone devoid of any semblance of guilt. Despite her air of innocence, I could only think she'd done *something* to trigger a response like this, and was curious to know what. If I were to put in a second request, I would have very much appreciated it if the

madam stopped fanning the flames of her master's rage with buckets of oil.

"Why did it take you *three months* to return?"

The dean's low growl caused my sister to flinch and squeeze my hand tight. I'd managed to convince her to obediently sit on the lady's lap, but Elisa hadn't forgotten what occurred in the lobby.

"Oh, but Master, have you forgotten? I was sent off into the world with but two unhurried horses to my name. I would quite appreciate it if you revised your calculations with this in mind."

Lady Agrippina's casual everyday demeanor had caused me to question whether or not she was a true aristocrat at times. Yet I now knew her blood was a noble blue—what other class of people could indulge in taunts this courteous? Even the best of merchants would sneak a sharp edge in among the honeyed words.

That being said, the madam wasn't wrong. While her particularity for quality inns was sickening, we hadn't taken any major detours, and the only stops we made had been on account of bad weather. All in all, I didn't think our journey was long enough to trigger this much anger...

Wait a minute. Thinking back, this was the same woman who tore holes through space for even the most inconsequential things. I didn't know the details, since space-bending magic was still locked in my character sheet, but on one occasion, she'd teleported the whole carriage all the way back to Helga's manor from its route to an inn. In which case, there clearly weren't severe restrictions on distance or targets.

"Do you mean to tell me that a formal researcher of my cadre has forgotten the inner workings of the space-bending spells she used to earn her position?"

I should've known! All this time, I'd convinced myself that there had to be an excuse as to why we were trekking for miles and miles on our horses' hooves, but it had all been a bluff! Sure, I hadn't *asked*, but seeing the homebody methuselah willingly choose the tedium of travel hadn't given me any reason to!

Anger aside, I was still curious as to why she'd chosen to spend three moons'

time meandering across the Empire, considering how opposed to travel she was. With the ability to return in the snap of a finger, I saw no reason for the embodiment of sloth I served to dutifully roll along the roads like everyone else.

“Furthermore,” Lady Leizniz said, “you *deliberately* reported your new apprentice to the College without first notifying me, going so far as to use the Stahl name to speed along the process. What do you say to that?”

“Oho ho,” my master chuckled. “Paperwork is such a chore, don’t you agree? I merely wished to clear up the bothersome minutiae quickly, leaving time to touch up the documents to be of respectable make. Having built up my name as a magus in my own right, it simply wouldn’t do to trouble my darling mentor with the bothersome concerns of bureaucracy—I’m sure you have your own students to care for, after all. Now, would you please take a gander?”

Lady Agrippina extended her hand, producing a bundle of documents from thin air. Wrapped in silky cloth, the papers slid across the table to Lady Leizniz. The wraith eyed it with scorn as she tore the fabric open; glaring daggers into the pages, she seemed ready to rip the whole thing to shreds should she find a single error. While enjoying the soft sensation on my head (I’d given up on thinking at this point) I took a glance at the text.

Wow, that’s hard!

Thanks in part to a lot of effort spent reading, my Palatial Tongue skill was at V: Adept, but everything on the page flew over my head. The words were sculpted into euphemisms, poetic turns of phrase, historical allusions, linguistic conventions, and enough references to obscure family lines to make the Old Testament quake in its boots. Trying to read it was poison for my brain.

My fatigued mind drifted off to think about how incredible state scribes truly were when the booklet slammed shut. Apparently, the document was so well written that the brilliant dean of one of the College’s largest factions hadn’t been able to find any mistakes. The pieces fell into place: *this* had been why the madam had needed to stall for three months.

“I do remember you once saying—oh, when was it?” Lady Agrippina mused. “Ah, yes, it was twenty-one years ago, in the summer. It was *terribly* hot on that day, if you recall. Indeed, the heat made my departure from the indoors ever

more unbearable.”

As contempt oozed from the methuselah’s lips, I shriveled to be as small as possible, not wanting to draw the attention of either terrifying woman. Despite the concentrated scorn dripping into Lady Leizniz’s ear, her mind (I wondered how ghosts formed thoughts, anyway?) was still sharp, evidenced by the fact that the air around us was still habitable. If she were to repeat her winter storm from earlier at this range, Elisa and I would turn into popsicles.

“You told me I could return if I were to ever find an apprentice that I had no choice but to care for myself. You did, didn’t you? You wouldn’t say you forgot, would you?” My master hid her mouth behind a baroque fan. “How *peculiar* that would be. The great dean who has led our cadre for two centuries, *forgetting* a promise of hers?”

Please stop, I’m begging you. What do you want from me? If you tell me to go kill someone to get you to take this negotiation seriously, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.

“Then...”

I heard a strained voice from above. Peering up curiously, my eyes were met by the gentle features of the wraith.

“Then what about him?! As loath as I am to say this, I shall allow you to take an apprentice and return to your laboratory in the name of education. But this boy isn’t in the documents! No fair!”

What do you mean, “No fair”? Please don’t start acting like a child now...

“It’s not fair that you get to keep *two* adorable children all to yourself! And one’s a *changeling*! I’ve never raised a changeling student before! All I’ve had as of late are insolent pigs and disgusting old farts!”

Oh... So you’re that kind of... Ah.

Beginning to get the hint, I reevaluated the woman hugging me and my sister. Lady Leizniz wasn’t just an important magus—she was an *incredibly* important magus who also happened to be a vitality glorifier. In every world, people like her were among the worst of the worst. Why in Their name did the gods let her go about her business everyday?

To be fair, I knew I was cute, on account of the Mother's Son and Soothing Visage traits I'd taken years ago. For whatever reason, I could remember my features from my past life, so my opinion of how attractive I was felt fairly unbiased.

I wasn't adorable enough to look like a girl or anything, but I had once thought my face would land well with someone whose tastes trended younger. Finding out that I'd been completely correct in a situation like this was less than satisfying.

Had I been a girl, I would have started to show signs of puberty—I wondered why Margit flashed in my mind when she was one of the few exceptions—but my body was still stuck in childhood. In recent memory, I'd been excited to see my shoulders and general outline sharpen up a bit, but I was still far from escaping the realm of cuteness in the eyes of the world at large.

"I want him!"

Please, no.

[Tips] Unfortunately, Rhinian law has few written protections for children and young adults. Vitality glorifiers are only brought to pay for their deeds if they cross certain lines.

I considered myself a voracious reader, picking up any book regardless of genre. For a brief period in my past life, I'd fallen down the rabbit hole of Harlequin romance novels in the hopes of bettering my ability to role-play women (in a voiceless setting, mind you—I did *not* go around speaking in falsetto).

I'd been young: sappy romance was the closest thing to femininity I could think of, and to my unseasoned soul, those novels were the perfect way to put myself in the shoes of a woman. At the very least, I hoped it would give me some insight into becoming a more attractive man.

What awaited me were a slew of exceedingly stunning men in positions of great power, whisking away the heroines with what I could scarcely consider consent. Each time I read through the formulaic narratives of deepening bonds,

I found myself thinking that no man could ever be so perfect, but the stories were fun all the same. Surely, women held the same opinion of the characters in dating sims.

Among the many plot points familiar to these tales, one common trope was when the male lead dressed up the heroine to his liking, sparing no expense for the finest threads. I understood this to be a Cinderella moment of sorts, and these developments no doubt set many young girls' hearts aflutter. Meaningless as it was, I'd even imagined myself in the same situation and came to the conclusion that I would be able to appreciate it in some small way.

Yet if you were to ask me about my opinion now, I would be at a loss for words. No, apologies, that was a lie. I would *hate* it.

"Master, do you still...*partake*?" the madam asked.

"I can't help myself!" Lady Leizniz shouted. "He's so cute! This bland doublet is such a waste—let's put him in a snow-white pourpoint! I know the recent trend is to have some slack in the trousers, but a tighter fit would do so much better! And he ought to have boots that come up to his knees with gloves to match! Oh, no, wait. What about half slacks with tights?!"

The pillowy softness that had felt so comforting a moment prior now filled me with dread. I wished to leave behind the realms of sex and gender altogether and go home to Konigstuhl. I wondered what my parents were doing. How was Heinz getting along? Perhaps Miss Mina's belly was already beginning to expand. I hoped Margit was faring well.

"And this dress isn't terrible, but it's *far* too drab for a girl like her! Look at this dainty little face. She needs an extravagant dress in the pitchest black money can buy! With frills—more of them! Obviously, her skirt needs a pannier to fluff it up so it can go with the luxurious fan I'm going to give her. The look won't be very childlike, but that's exactly what makes it so good!"



My escapist train of thought ground to a halt as Elisa squeezed my fingers as hard as she could. I couldn't understand why I was here. The woman's rapid speech terrified me, and the fact that her beautiful features didn't falter at a time like this only made the whole affair even more disappointing.

Lady Leizniz's chilling entry to the scene was at such odds to her current demeanor that I could hear my brain sputtering out. If nothing else, couldn't she choose one personality and stick with it?

"Mr. Brother," my sister whispered. "Scared..."

"Just a bit longer, Elisa." I clasped her hand in both of mine and tried to encourage her to hold out. I was just as afraid as her, but we weren't in a position to complain.

"Alas, I've signed numerous documents with Erich's parents when I came to take him as a servant. All of the terms are as you see here." Lady Agrippina conjured another stack of papers that silenced the wraith's flood of words. "You may want him all you please, but I can't simply toss him away so easily..."

"Grr..." Lady Leizniz growled and tightened her grip.

I'm scared. I think it might be time to let go. Please? I haven't even hit puberty yet!

At any rate, I wanted my liege to get to the point. The fact that she was spurring her own master on to this degree meant there had to be something she wanted, and it would do me wonders to have her spit it out already. I wanted to *leave*: being hugged tight by a wraith obsessed with my childlike vivacity was quickly becoming a catastrophe greater than the circumstances of my little sister's birth.

"Of course, that all depends on Erich's will," Lady Agrippina said, tossing me a verbal grenade.

No, stop! Don't pin this on me! The wraith had clenched my shoulders and begun smiling down at me before the madam had finished speaking. *How did it turn out like this?*

"Hello, little Erich," she said. "If you'd like, I would love to welcome you as an

honorary student at my—”

“I humbly decline.” Never in my life had words of refusal slipped off my tongue so smoothly. Deep within, a voice screamed out that if I let this moment of reprieve go, her next statement would ruin me; I could not let her put in another word. “My place is to serve Madam Stahl, and even personally, I find your offer to be more than I deserve.”

As short as my work history was, the position of servant was the perfect shield to parry her proposal. I’d long wished to learn the secrets of the mystic arts through books and mentorship, but I still had the self-respect to pick my own master. I readied myself for the final push...only to spot the madam’s lips curling into a villainous sneer.

Oh. I’m screwed.

“Well put,” the madam said. “Yet Erich here has a penchant for spellcasting, and he is a splendid boy trying to earn his sister’s tuition in any way he can. Thus, should you be willing to accept a handful of terms, I would be more than willing to allot a certain amount of *free time* in his schedule.”

Lady Agrippina’s motives were so ulterior that they paradoxically showed on the surface, and her grin was the lowest of the low.

What’s “free time” supposed to mean? Who is going to be using whose time freely—no, go on, tell me. I can’t help but feel like this isn’t going to be time in the day that I can use to enjoy myself as I please.

“Very well,” the dean said. “Speak.”

You scum of the earth! You used me as a bargaining chip?! Oh, you better remember this.

I was busy etching an oath of vengeance into my soul, and Lady Leizniz looked like she was grinding a bitter insect to dust with her back molars. Yet across from us, my methuselah master had a wide, taunting grin chock-full of all the world’s evil.

“Firstly, I would dearly appreciate some time to recuperate. I was hard at work in the field for twenty-one years, after all.”

“...Fine. Rest at your leisure. I shall allot you half a year.”

The madam’s first request went through without resistance. While six months was an eternity without work for me, it wasn’t particularly strange for a noble. Retreating to a secondary residence for a year was common practice, or so I’d been told.

“And those twenty-one years of work will need to be properly recorded in an official report. Wherever will I find the, say, two to three years needed to polish my prose?”

She was lying. There was no doubt in my mind that she’d already finished the whole thing. I didn’t need the Deception Block skill in the upper classes of the Sociability tree to know that.

“Two years granted,” the wraith said. “I would *never* doubt you had already completed the document, which I’m sure the two years’ time I’m granting suffices to prove. I expect great things.”

“Oho ho, but of course. I shall put the whole of my efforts into producing something worthy of your eyes.”

The madam’s second request brought her total to two and a half years of leisure time. While it may have been a blink of an eye for an eternal creature, that was a massive length of time for the College to fund someone and their workshop. Most people would come close to killing for that amount of paid leave; selling out her servant was chump change.

What was more, I knew my client: in two and a half years, she would find some kind of excuse to take more time off after her moratorium came to a close.

“Let me see,” Lady Agrippina continued. “Even after the completion of my report, there will be so much to do. All the greetings and preparation needed to attend another lecture makes my head swirl...”

“Fine! Well enough! I shall write as many letters on your behalf as you desire!”

What is wrong with you? For the record, I probably—no, *certainly*—wasn’t worth all this trouble. Elisa, maybe. But me?

“My, my,” Lady Agrippina said. “If you’re going to accommodate me so handsomely, I must see to it that I uphold my end of the bargain. Looking after me oughtn’t take too much of the boy’s time, anyhow.”

How long had the madam planned for this? I’d signed the contract knowing that our relationship would be marked by the both of us taking advantage of one another, but if this had been part of the plan this whole time, she was beyond redemption.

I couldn’t catch a break. I was here to let Elisa live a life with human rights and to one day set off on an adventure, not to play around with degenerates...

[Tips] The College’s researchers and professors receive ample research grants, bolstered by bonuses, honors, and even salaries upon making groundbreaking discoveries.

And so, after being sold off to a filthy vitality glorifier in a shady backroom deal, I found myself...in a patrician clothing store on the northern end of the capital.

Roads sliced the capital into sixteenths from the palace in its center, and the northern sections were home to many high-class dwellings brimming with historical value. Some residents were technically common folk, but they were invariably distinguished scribes or otherwise talented. The area was so dignified that lowborn folk hesitated to set foot in it, even if they had official business to attend to.

Pristine white stones paved the streets; the carriages that rolled across them each had their own forerunner (that is, a person whose sole duty was to disperse crowds for the incoming vehicle) and proudly flew flags signifying the upstanding heritage of those within. Although I saw a handful of lightly armored individuals riding directly on their steeds, they were no doubt either knights or bodyguards for especially wealthy nobles.

“Oh my, what a pretty shade of gold. You are so very right, my lady. White will fit him wonderfully. If only it were a bit longer, we could braid it with ribbons and gems.”

“A moment, please. The navy blue velvet that came in from the west the other day would be sure to suit him just as well. And what shall we do for the embroidery?”

“What say you we ruffle his collar? Ah, but the current fad is to dress children down to give them a more simple overall look... How difficult.”

“I think he needs a tie—no, perhaps a scarf? Whether we use white or blue as his base, a deep red accent would be perfect for this gallant face.”

Yet here I was, in a clothing store so luxurious that it was liable to turn away the nouveau riche with the same upturned nose it did the poor. I’d been stripped of the doublet Lady Agrippina had prepared for me, and four seamstresses were measuring me in my undergarments.

The tasteful furnishings of the room made it abundantly clear that this was not the kind of establishment to sell off-the-rack articles or hand-me-downs like the ones frequented by people of my stature. Every outfit in the store was a display piece; the real products were made to order, tailored to the customer and the customer alone. As far as clothing went, this was the most bourgeois place anyone could hope to shop at.

Ready-made items were unheard of in the noble sphere, and I’d heard that they even had baby clothes sewn from scratch. Still, I wouldn’t have ever dreamed of patronizing a place like this myself.

The workers brought one new roll of cloth (each enough to buy my house, farm, and all who lived on it) after another. Having these fabrics placed to my neck filled me with intense fear: an ill-timed sneeze would sink me into more debt than I cared to imagine. As much as I wanted to make my escape, I had my orders. Without the right to even hide myself, all I could do was power through.

“Mr. Brother,” Elisa whined. “Tired...”

“Just a little longer. I’ll treat you to some ice candy later.”

Above all else, my baby sister had been dragged here too. It was my duty as her older brother to stand resolute beside her and protect her in any way I could.

“Ah,” Lady Leizniz sighed blissfully. “The current emperor is so wise to reopen

our trade routes to the east. Where else would we find silk this beautiful? I'd like golden embroidery—oh, my apologies, not that one. Do we have a darker gold?"

In contrast, the source of all that ailed us was in high spirits after she'd won the right to dress us up from our master. Lady Leizniz made her purchases more casually than a shopper buying chocolate from a convenience store, yet the custom requests on each order were ludicrously detailed. Thinking about the final total was enough to upset my stomach.

However, there was still something in it for me. First, Lady Leizniz had been taken by my determination to earn Elisa's tuition by my own hand, and awarded me special permission to use the College's job bulletin.

To explain in short, the job bulletin was a quest board. Being a massive institution, the College was made up of magia from every end of society. Where some professors were active nobles that happened to get invested in their magical hobby, others earned their title after long years of subsisting on bland oatmeal to win a living.

Extrapolating down, the same could be said of the students. Well-to-do sons and daughters leisurely attended classes from secondary or tertiary holdings in the capital with the aim of one day becoming Rhinian diplomats; their penniless counterparts knocked on the College's doors out of an unfettered ambition to go from mage to magus, ready to make ends meet on their own terms.

With such extreme disparity in wealth, the magia of the College implemented a system of work distribution known as the job bulletin to assist the needy among them. Requests varied wildly: some hired help carrying their luggage (trustworthy porters were a rarity in this world), some asked for editorial revisions, some needed educated herbalists to gather specific plants, some required temporary assistants to mix potions, some sought a party to join them on polar expeditions, and some just wanted a partner to practice spells with.

Benevolent professors even offered tasks especially for struggling students, like requests to make tea parties or dinner events more lively. These thinly veiled excuses were dreamlike opportunities to hand students money while treating them to tea or supper.

The bulletin board was not open to the public. The whole point of its inception would be rendered moot if adventurers could snatch up the valuable quests offered there. In fact, some leading professors used the system as a means of scouting promising young mages into their cadres.

Since I was neither a student nor an apprentice of an official researcher, my current predicament was the price I paid for access to these opportunities. At first, Lady Leizniz had offered a stipend in a curious form of patronage, but I'd feared what she might ask of me in the future and politely declined. Instead, I'd told her I wanted to find a way to earn my own keep, leading to our current agreement.

I now had a means of earning extra change whenever I had free time on my hands, though I was still bound by my lower standing. My presence would obviously go against the spirit of those afternoon teatime invitations that I mentioned previously, and I lacked the formal status to do anything like editing another's treatise.

However, having an avenue of income at all was cause for celebration. Lady Leizniz recommended that I make a name for myself with the researchers and students of her cadre and work my way up from there, and I planned to follow her advice.

I couldn't be more grateful that I now had a vision for my future. Being half naked and toyed with like a dress-up doll by a handful of women who "accidentally" brushed across my skin at times was a small price to pay.

Again, I hadn't expected to find a point of empathy with the plight of the modern woman in the Trialist Empire. Had the people around me not been a strange pervert and her cronies, the whole thing might have been rather enjoyable. Alas, the events of my life seemed to always be one step shy of success.

Putting that aside, I had one more thing to be thankful for: when Lady Leizniz had heard that I'd begun my arcane studies, she offered me access privileges for the College's library, from the entrance all the way to the middle layer. What was more, it came with the so-called restriction of only allowing me this opportunity when she was there to accompany me.

Take a moment to imagine this: I was to be joined by the *dean* of a faction that had survived for two centuries in an institution ruthless enough to leave the weak groveling in pools of their own blood. She may have been a vitality glorifier (the fact that this didn't automatically make her a criminal was a crying shame), but receiving instruction from her was a boon like no other.

The overwhelming power of a wraith was not enough to lead a cadre at the College. Lady Leizniz was exemplary as a teacher, researcher, and even politician, seeing as she'd managed to continue her reign to this point in spite of her scandalous sensibilities.

Thus, the shame I bore now—and the shame I was sure to bear many a time from this point on—was going to be worth it. In my past life, I'd endured all manner of rough part-time jobs just for the spare scratch to cover the cost of a supplement that opened up a whole new world; this would be no different.

"Lady Leizniz, what do you think of a hat? We can't simply abandon fads in their entirety, I think."

"That's very true," the wraith said. "Oh, I know! The headpiece we saw at the banquet the other night would be marvelous. You know the one—wide-brimmed and fluffy! The feather sticking off of it was so adorable..."

Admittedly, manning a cash register at a convenience store was orders of magnitudes less exhausting, but I swore to hold out all the same. If nothing else, I had to stay and make sure Elisa's outfit wasn't too outlandish. I had four seamstresses on me, but she had a whopping *six*.

With renewed resolve, I decided to ask something that had been on my mind for some time. Running my mouth was far less painful than running my mind, considering what the future held in store for me.

"Excuse me, Lady Leizniz," I said.

"Hm? What is it, my dear? You're free to call me Lena, you know?"

I met the wraith's wide grin with one of my own in an attempt to glide past her outrageous request to use her diminutive. She was my elder in both flesh and mind, and the sort of refined soul to make visits to the royal court; a farm-born brat had no place referring to her with that level of affection.

“Um,” I said, shifting the conversation back to my question with a pointed hand. “What is that?”

My curiosity had been piqued by a peculiar dress put up on display. This world’s fashion ranged from the tunics and togas of Classical Western Earth to the art deco of the early twentieth century, but the specimen before me was a far cry from even the fabric-saving designs seen in the countryside.

It was a cocktail dress of sorts. As finely crafted as it was, it puzzled me that they sold something with so little grandeur in its design.

“Ah,” Lady Leizniz said, “that is a luncheon dress. I take it you don’t see them in rural towns?”

“Yes, well... I was simply wondering if nobles purchase dresses like those.”

“They do indeed.” The wraith pinched the skirt of her traditional gown—which, I now realized, was technically part of her corporeal form.

“Conventionally, gowns are thought to be ‘proper’ attire, but our grand Empire places few restrictions on how we decorate ourselves. Isn’t that so?”

One of the seamstresses nodded along with a smile and picked up the cocktail dress so that I could get a good look.

“This style has been popular for the past few years as luncheon wear in less formal settings. Simple designs with shorter skirts to show off the limbs are especially in vogue.”

“That way, they pair nicely with long gloves and tights. But ladies who are particularly confident in their skin or the contours of their arms and legs make it a point to go against the trend.”

“I’ve heard older women decry these as indecent, but I think that might be because this sort of fashion only suits younger ladies.”

“But don’t you remember our last order? The shoulders were totally bare. I can see why some might say they look like undergarments.”

The four tailors continued to work without pause in spite of all their chatter. At this point, they’d moved on from teaching me and were simply enjoying a conversation about their favorite hobby.

I liked seeing that they were here because they loved fashion from the bottom of their hearts. Perhaps that was the secret behind the store's success in high society.

"This dress is wonderfully sewn," Lady Leizniz said. "Little Elisa will look darling in something like this in five years, I'm sure."

Whoa, wait a second. Five years wasn't even close to enough time for my sister to wear something like that. My initial suspicions were beginning to take tangible form: my hunch was that this woman had a fetish for dressing young girls in clothes that were way too mature for them. I'd thought her condition was severe, but not *this* bad.

"I think it would look fantastic on *you*, Lady Leizniz," one of the seamstresses said. "Would you like to place an order for yourself?"

"Oh, please," the wraith replied. "I'm a two-hundred-year-old granny, dear. The latest trends wouldn't suit someone like me."

"My lady, your beauty is the same as it was the day you turned nineteen. In my humble opinion, I declare that you would look positively gorgeous in it." Judging from the woman's bloodred eyes, deathly white skin, and the fact that she knew Lady Leizniz's age at her time of death, it was readily apparent that my seamstress was not mortal.

"Ah," Lady Leizniz said, rerouting the conversation, "why did this catch your eye, Erich?"

"Maybe he wanted you to wear it, my lady."

Ha. Ha. Funny.

I tried to ignore the excited squeals in my ear. Admittedly, the seamstresses were right to say that Lady Leizniz would look good in the dress, but I can assure you that her beauty would be the last thing I'd ever dedicate thought to.

The reason I'd been so puzzled was that I'd been preparing Lady Agrippina's attire for some time now, and her wardrobe contained nothing but nightwear, robes, and the apparently standard gowns. Although she had a ludicrous number of them—rotten nobles were still nobles, it seemed—they were all of similar design and nothing struck me as particularly provocative. I'd thought

that all of the privileged dressed in formal clothing at all times.

Seeing a cocktail dress in an establishment catering exclusively to the upper crust had confounded me. The thought that my employer was the exception and not the norm hadn't crossed my mind. Going forward, I would need to learn more about high society than just etiquette—after all, my failures were also my master's failures.

After explaining as much to Lady Leizniz, she put a hand to her cheek and sighed in exasperation.

"She hates tedium, you see. Since gown dresses are acceptable in any situation, her plan is to wear nothing but gowns to rid herself of the mental effort involved with getting dressed."

Ah, I see. For once, I could put myself in Lady Agrippina's shoes. A lifetime ago, I'd done the same when selecting articles for my own wardrobe. What a strange way to grow closer to my employer...

"Robes are the gown dresses of the magia, so all she needs is a staff to be ready for any social event she might be invited to... Goodness, what a troublemaker."

Wearing a proper robe was a hallmark of magia, and one had to enroll as an official student at the College before they could consider donning a set. It was both the formal dress and official uniform of the Imperial College; the madam had bought up a closetful for convenience's sake, no doubt.

In fact, the reason she wore dresses more than a few touches too lavish for everyday use was likely to save herself the hassle of changing when receiving a sudden invitation. Methuselah hardly ever sweated or created any sort of waste matter, so her kind didn't even need to do the laundry.

"We'll need to put in an order for Elisa's robe in the near future," Lady Leizniz said. "Feel free to come straight to me when the time comes."

I'd been told it was tradition for students to receive their robe and staff from their master or another elder with whom they were close. I would ask Lady Agrippina to prepare Elisa's. I didn't want her dressing in something meant for a grown woman. Not to say my sister wouldn't look adorable in anything and

everything she wore, but I wasn't about to let her put on something inappropriate.

That being said, I had no idea that staffs were part of the official getup. Up until now, I'd witnessed Lady Agrippina settle her spells with snaps, or otherwise imbue her breath or the smoke of her pipe with mana; maybe she had a real treasure hidden away. The madam was a broken unit that wouldn't look out of place as a regional boss monster, so her equipment *had* to be the type of prize to make a player's heart pound when it dropped.

I let my merry imagination distract me from my shameful situation as I waited for time to pass.

[Tips] “Let nobility be found in austerity.” These are the words of the Trialist Empire’s founding monarch; alas, history has yet to see any devote themselves to his teachings.

After a round of measurements and a design session that chipped away at my soul, I made my way back to the College. Tuckered out, Elisa was snoozing on my back as we waited in front of an imposing elevator.

Our freedom had been long awaited; the sun was nowhere to be seen, and it was well past suppertime. I couldn't blame Elisa for drifting off, considering that my body felt like lead despite not having moved an inch. The anxiety that comes with uncomfortable activities in uncomfortable places is sure to cause fatigue. Honestly, the whole affair had bordered on torture. Not even in modern corporate life had I ever been in an environment where I couldn't so much as sneeze for hours on end.

That being said, I was genuinely thankful that I didn't have to drag my weary legs up a flight of stairs. The contraption installed in the wall before me was an elevator, through and through. Seeing a passenger box designed for efficient vertical movement using a series of wires and pulleys may have surprised me, had I not already been acquainted with the rest of this world.

I was all for it. With a blue ribbon in hand, one could expect to use a private express elevator in a mad overlord's castle, and Krahenschanze looked the part

well enough without daylight.

I shifted my weight to secure Elisa with one hand and used the other to press a call button for one of the many elevators. Seven in all, I'd activated one labeled for passage to low-to-mid-level laboratories. Carrying myself here in my sorry state had been a daunting task, but anything was better than Lady Leizniz's alternative suggestion to let her see us home—or worse, to stay the night at her manor.

Admittedly, her offer of a bathtub large enough to swim in swayed me for a moment, but I was the type to hedge my bets. Besides, her conduct was cause enough to refuse.

The clear ding of a bell let me know that the cable car had been waiting for us all along. A gate the size of a freight elevator slid open and welcomed us aboard. The interior was oddly mystifying, perhaps owing to its lack of a console—in its place was a hole for one to speak into. In fairness, the College was so expansive that a whole wall dedicated to buttons would fail to suffice.

“Middle laboratories: Baroness heir Agrippina du Stahl's workshop.”

Magic made for an exceptional user interface: all I had to do was tell the elevator where I wanted to go, and it did the work for me. Though, had I not been told how to use it beforehand, I probably would have been stuck there wondering how to turn the thing on.

“Ah, excuse me! Hold the door!”

Just as the gate began to shut, I heard someone cry out from beyond. The voice bouncing around the large, empty halls belonged to a child around my age. Although they were still too young for me to determine their gender based on voice alone, I could see them running straight at us.

With no reason to engage in a mean-spirited prank, I ordered the lift to cancel my previous command. The closing doors reversed their motion and the child slipped into the cabin.

“Whew, sorry,” she...no, *he* said with a smile after a few exhausted huffs. “You really saved me.”



The boy...girl? *Wait, which are you?*

Getting back on track, the boy—tentatively—looked to be just my age and wore a black robe paired with a simple wand to signify his status as a student. Judging from the bundle of sheepskins in his hand, he had either just gone to fetch something or was about to turn in a report.

Hearing his voice perplexed me, and a closer look at his mysterious features only served to blur the truth of his gender further. His glossy black hair had a bit of a wave to it, and his grin bore equal parts feminine charm and masculine rigidity. Although he looked like a normal mensch overall, he was easily the most androgynous person I'd ever laid eyes on. If angels were meant to be genderless, he may have been the prime example.

"Haven't seen you around. New student?" As he spoke, his amber eyes twinkled with boyish merriment. Yet the lips that moved were plump like a young girl's.

"No, I am but a humble servant to Lady Agrippina, heir to the Stahl Barony. My sister, as you can see here, is her apprentice."

"Stahl? I haven't heard of her either... Oh, sorry to keep you."

"I'm in no hurry. Go on ahead," I said, beckoning to the voice hole.

"Thanks, you're a nice guy!" The boy uttered his destination with a smile. He was headed for a professor's atelier: apparently, the stack of papers was to be turned in, and soon. "Now that I think of it, I didn't introduce myself, did I? My name's Mika."

I shook his outstretched hand with a small sense of awe that even his *name* was androgynous. "Mika" was a common name used by men and women alike in the Trialist Empire. However, the name was common in every sense of the word, so I could surmise that he was a lowborn citizen here from the countryside, not an aristocrat born in Berylin.

The elevator ride mysteriously pulled us every which way, but our small talk during it was exceedingly ordinary. Mika hailed from the north, and had won an endorsement from his local magistrate to enroll at the College. Well on his path to becoming a magus, he was apprenticed to a professor from the School of

First Light, whose goal was the “concealment of magecraft for proper usage alone.”

“I’m hoping to become an oikodomurge one day. The northern reaches of the Empire are buried in snow, so I want to have the architectural skills to build infrastructure that can stand up to the elements.”

Seeing him speak with such pride soothed my weary soul. This was the sort of thing I wanted to see: a young boy venturing out from the countryside to chase his dreams at the College. Not once had I asked to involve myself with a vitality-glorifying wraith or the world’s most irredeemable methuselah.

“Gosh, *finally*,” he said as the elevator stopped. “Well, hope to see you around.”

Fun times were never to last. The gate opened with another ring of the bell to unveil not a hallway, but another door. Mika slipped through and vanished as quickly as he’d appeared.

What a refreshing young man. I felt rejuvenated: as of late, everyone around me possessed an excess of character, and my chance encounter with an honest, straightforward personality left me in high spirits...which only made my meeting with the madam all the more disheartening.

“My, you look so tired,” my dearly beloved Agrippina du Stahl said.

Jokes aside, I could hardly believe that Lady Agrippina’s atelier was located in the fathoms of earth below the College. Once the elevator stopped, I entered through a lavish front door and walked past a massive sitting room fit for entertaining guests to arrive at her workshop proper. The gentle rays of a spring sun flooded onto live grass, the space looking more like a greenhouse than a laboratory. How was I meant to accept that this was a *cellar*?

Krahenschanze was a castle of superb make, but it was built with stone like any other. Packing it full of magia laboratories given to explode at any moment was less than agreeable, especially with the imperial palace less than a kilometer away.

One detonation could easily trigger another, and then another, chaining together delightful eruptions like a match-three puzzle game. Surely a blast

large enough to wipe away a whole state would make for quite the show, even on the other side of the planet.

Thus, the highly intelligent leaders of the College elected to bury their facilities deep underground. Each laboratory was an isolated chamber dug out from the hardest bedrock; the only way in or out was the elevator, itself imbued with the long-lost—that is, ignoring a certain individual who used the stuff to hop into bed—art of space-bending magic.

These arrangements meant that magia were free to slip up without endangering the capital. Otherwise, the College would have been cast out to a remote region in the name of national security long ago. Nobody wanted to live out their days next to a warhead liable to wipe them away with the tiniest mistake, and placing a country's royal palace right next door would be the workings of a madman.

Personally, I couldn't help but wonder who would be tasked with salvaging the elevator should it be caught up in an incident. To my TRPG-addled mind, these terroristic thoughts were of critical importance. After all, a large part of tabletop games was coming up with ways to defeat enemies without resorting to combat. I refused to believe there was a player alive who hadn't tried to cave in a goblin nest or light a vampire's mansion on fire under the midday sun.

Nevertheless, I dutifully got to work. Book in hand, Lady Agrippina looked oh-so-relaxed in her hammock as she ordered me to lay Elisa on a couch. Garden landscapes surrounded the glass room on all sides; I didn't know how the madam had done it, but her fixation on putting her incredible skills to terrible use was on full display.

"And?" the methuselah asked. "What kind of outfit is she to gift you?"

"...I would appreciate it if you didn't ask."

Had I worn any of the clothes Lady Leizniz ordered in my past life, I would have been lucky to be politely told they didn't suit me. At the very least, it felt like an endless array of deranged costumes to me, though both the customer and retailer were squealing with joy. The dean had gone so far as to pay an additional fee to expedite the order, meaning my new threads would be ready in seven days. This next week was shaping up to be the most mentally taxing of

my life...

“Well, it is far from a bad deal, so carry on.” Lady Agrippina abandoned all airs—fitting, as her workshop was an overblown lounge—and smiled lazily. “As for me, I will be enjoying my sweet abode that I’ve pined for for twenty-one years... Ah... How wonderful... As splendid as my bed may be, this hammock is simply divine.”

She was right to say that my deal with Lady Leizniz wasn’t *bad*, per se. Yet between the costs and benefits, the costs were still unbearably steep. Still, the madam had sweetened the deal to prevent me from kicking up a fuss. In fact, her offer had been the final nail to seal the coffin of self-sacrifice that was my fashion show.

Lady Agrippina was to bring me a book from the sealed vault in the innermost depths of the College’s library. Combined with the general access afforded by Lady Leizniz’s accompaniment, I could round off my mystical fundamentals with a nugget of golden knowledge at the peak of magecraft. In short, I was about to amass all the supplements for a tabletop game’s magic system.

I worried at first whether Lady Agrippina’s promise would cause legal trouble, but we lived under a medieval political system and she was a researcher of great authority. Her outrageous deal was a sign of how confident she was that she’d get her way.

Of course, that also meant I was due to be used at the bargaining table again in the future, but the small fear welling up in my heart was a price I was willing to pay. Rulebooks were expensive, after all; those thin booklets had the gall to demand a *minimum* of three thousand yen without shame.

Now, I had all the building blocks of a min-maxed build. The game was on my home court. Knowing that the College was the perfect place to sharpen my wit, I’d been saving the experience points Helga had granted me, and it was finally time to crack open the safe. Having all the rules to bend is prerequisite for a munchkin to reach his full potential, after all.

There was a particular joy to crafting strong characters with base rulebooks, but publishers printed supplements with every intention that they be used. If they were legal, what kind of power gamer would I be to ignore them?

PCs could only accrue so much experience in their lifetime, and I was no exception. Obviously, I wanted to see all of my options before I sat down to spend my hard-earned funds. I couldn't exactly come up with a retort if you called me out on my smaller purchases, but...well, I *had* to. Defeat was frustrating, and losing in foxes-and-geese was still a loss.

At any rate, I was fast approaching a turning point in my life: soon, I would finally set my path to becoming a peerless adventurer in stone. All that remained was to comb through every detail on my character sheet and wring each and every experience point for all it was worth to create a powerful yet reliable combination of skills. I could hardly wait; my excitement made the trials and tribulations of cosplay feel like a worthy investment.

"What an unsightly smirk," Lady Agrippina remarked. "Well, anyhow, take this."

My spirits were so high that the madam's sudden words of abuse failed to sully my mood in the slightest. A tabletop gamer's thrill on the cusp of a power spike was hard to dampen. However, an insult hadn't been the only thing Lady Agrippina tossed my way—I caught a single key out of the air.

"I pulled some strings to prepare a house for you in the low quarter," she said.

"Huh? A house? I thought servants were to live with their masters."

"This is a researcher's laboratory, so all I have is a personal bedroom, a living room, a workshop, a storage closet, and a single empty room meant for a disciple. Regulations dictate that servants and stewards are only to be housed on site by titled professors, and I wouldn't want it to be so cramped."

Since when have you cared about regulations?

"So," she went on, ignoring my shock, "you shall sleep and wake there."

As the madam lazily concluded, a butterfly landed on the key in my hand. It was no ordinary creature: the snow-white insect had been crafted out of a single sheet of folded paper. I was awestruck. *How on earth did she make this?*

The butterfly fluttered off to the elevator, beckoning me to follow suit. Apparently, this sentient papercraft was my map.

“The spare room has yet to be furnished, so tuck your sister in there,” Lady Agrippina said. “I’m sure my sofa is still far superior to a bed in a mangy inn. Dig around in the chests for a blanket, will you?”

Although leaving Elisa alone with her made me anxious, I put the laboratory behind me after preparing the bedding. I’d also asked about unloading the madam’s carriage and preparing her supper, but she’d sent me along saying that neither was necessary. Perhaps she’d done it herself.

Ordered by my employer to leave, I had no choice but to follow the butterfly as it led me through the capital to my lodging house. Generally speaking, a nighttime traveler could only rely on the gentle glow of the moon and stars in this era. Back in my hometown of Konigstuhl, walking the familiar roads of the canton was a plenty dangerous affair without at least a candle.

Yet the imperial capital shone brilliantly past sundown. Light spilled from windows, swirling together with the magical streetlamps lining the path at regular intervals. The scenery naturally evoked memories of a life long ago.

The streetlights were powered by mana stones tweaked to produce light, and there was a request on the College’s bulletin to turn them on each night. Supplying mana for a single lamp was a task worth five assarii, so powering a full street was a sizable paycheck. On our way to the clothing store, I’d seen a crowd of frugally dressed students gathering around the quest board in anticipation of its posting.

Well-lit pathways created opportunity for ambitious merchants to peddle their wares at night. The people of Rhine generally ate light breakfasts and dinners in favor of a hearty lunch, but the racial diversity of the city created a market for food after sundown: a few types of folk needed to eat more than three meals a day, and plenty were nocturnal.

A little ways away, a stuart couple had just bought a large batch of freshly boiled sausages. The familiar herbal smell wafting off of them indicated a popular imperial recipe using minced pork—a fact which made me want to question if the swine-faced orc merchant selling them had any moral quandaries about his work.

“Hey there, youngster!” he called. “Going to bed? Sleeping on an empty

stomach is rough stuff. Come on over, I'll make it cheap!"

While his bountiful silhouette would have been in the realm of morbid obesity for a mensch, the orc's crystal clear skin was evidence enough of good health. He waved me over with a wiener lathered in mustard, and I let myself get reeled in. I think everyone can agree that food made by chunkier people looks tastier than usual.

"How much?" I asked.

"Ten assarii a piece, but I'll make it twenty-five for three."

Wow. Big prices for a big city, I thought. Pubs in the countryside sold similar goods for half the price—in fact, ten assarii could buy a whole night's stay at a motel. Still, the man's prices were listed on a nearby sign, so I knew he wasn't cheating me.

I decided to listen to my stomach for the night; the day leading up to it had been tiring, after all. Refusing to fuel up now was to risk fizzling out the next day. Taking care of myself so that I'd be ready to work at a moment's notice was all a part of being a responsible member of society.

"Three sausages with plenty of mustard, please. Do you have any sauerkraut?"

"You bet!" he replied. "Wait a second, youngster. You got a plate or something? These things are hot, and it'll be five extra copper if you need a bag."

I hesitated for a bit. The tantalizing sight of the boiling pot made it hard for me to give up, even with the extra fee. But then I realized that I was worrying over a nonissue: I had the perfect "plate" to handle any food, regardless of temperature.

"Thank you, but I'll be fine."

"Ha ha! Didn't realize I was serving a mage."

I used an Unseen Hand to pick up the sausages and another as a lid to shield them from the open air. Investing in this spell had definitely been one of my better moves, especially since the experience cost didn't hike up until I

unlocked the sixth concurrent Hand. It had already proven useful in my dungeon-crawling adventure, and having it play a role in my everyday life made its cost performance all the more tangible.

Accompanied by the oddball sight of a pack of floating wieners, I walked with the arcane butterfly to the Mages' Corridor. Cheap boarding houses and motels abounded, aimed at poorer students without the connections to live on the campus proper, earning this sector the title of the low quarter.

My paper guide led me to a small single-unit home sandwiched between larger buildings. As I gaped at the luxury of living in a place like this, the butterfly fluttered off into the sky as if it had clocked out for the night. Looking up, the sight of its snowy wings flying toward the waxing black moon was hauntingly beautiful.

Tonight, the true moon had folded itself fully out of sight. It, too, had a poetic epithet in my homeland of yore: the *Saku-getsu*. So many of my most exhausting episodes had been overlooked by this empty lunar body. *A curse from my past life*, I mused.

I had every feeling that the next morning would be no less tiring as I steeled myself for another busy day. For now, I would retire with a hot meal to fill my belly.

[Tips] For better or for worse, Berylin is a city of firm governance and sociability. The endemic magia are similarly inclined to engage in political games.

Midsummer of the Twelfth Year

Party

A band of adventurers, especially those controlled by the players. Party members in TRPGs generally do not change, but some scenarios add guest NPCs to guide the players along.

Party composition is a key factor in determining the fate of a tabletop campaign. Competent allies can turn the most challenging trials into a grand story for the history books, but the inverse holds just as true.

A servant's day starts early. I know this sounds like the opening line to a documentary, but the truth is the truth. My internal clock had been finely tuned over years of farmwork, and the world beyond my cozy sheets was still dark.

The house Lady Agrippina had prepared for me was an old two-story building squeezed into the space between two other houses. It was a relic that had been maintained and renovated over the years, evidenced by how different its make was from the neighbors on both sides.

However, the interior was surprisingly nice. The previous tenants had all left their belongings; although this made cleaning a chore, I preferred it to the alternative of lacking basic necessities.

All that said, the being that had chased away the past inhabitants treated me with great care, so at times this new lodging was even more comfortable than my home in Konigstuhl. I remained sleepily curled up for a few minutes past my usual waking time, until I felt someone gently rock my shoulder and poke my cheek with a cold finger.

I let out an unflattering yawn and begrudgingly opened my eyes to see that the second-floor bedroom was completely uninhabited, save for me. Yet beside me were my morning change of clothes and a pail of water to rinse my face with. The bucket's contents were neither too cold nor too warm, and came with

a towel to boot.

“Thank you, Fraulein,” I said to my invisible caretaker.

Indulging in her kindness, I began splashing the water on my face. I doubt I need to explain that I hadn’t sprinkled fragrant herbs into a bucket before bed; no, this house was home to a silkie.

Silkies were household helpers that took the form of young maidens, but accounts varied as to whether they were alfar, general spirits, or weak and benevolent geists. By and large, these modest roommates haunted residential homes, either doing chores in place of stewards or playing pranks on the dweller. From their inclination to help diligent residents and chase off those that less suited their tastes, I found them to be incredibly alfish.

I’d caught a glimpse of her in a gray widow’s dress upon first arriving, and she had likely called this place home for a long time. Judging from the aesthetic mishmash of the furniture left in this house, she’d made herself quite busy chasing away anyone she found annoying.

Silkies were fairies of judgment: they blessed the earnest and punished the slothful or evil knaves that tried to nest in their domain. Make no mistake, much like the *zashiki-warashi* of the Far East, this Western house spirit was not a handy helper to be taken advantage of. The power needed to chase off the magia and mages that moved into this district without giving them a chance to recollect their beds or tableware—expensive items in this world—was terrifying to imagine.

At first, I’d been on the verge of exploding at my master for sending me to live in a haunted house. Luckily, the silkie had taken a liking to me, hustling and bustling around my new home every day. Her service was fit for a noble, and I had nothing but gratitude for her work. Finally, my hair and eyes had served a purpose other than getting me into trouble.

However, unlike the nameless fairies that merrily swung by to play with me, the silkie turned out to be rather shy. Other than my first sighting, I’d only ever seen her skirt the edge of my vision. I hadn’t heard her voice, and naturally I didn’t know her name.

Having no name to refer to her by had been inconvenient, so I’d begun calling

her the Ashen Fraulein. Considering that she had yet to air any grievances, I took it that she didn't mind the moniker.

Wanting to get changed so I could go eat breakfast, I reached for my shirt only to find its frayed sleeve completely mended. I looked over the work clothes and hand-me-downs I'd brought from home and saw that she'd repaired them all, even in parts that wouldn't show during regular wear.

The Ashen Fraulein's benevolence was admirable, but I did have *one* complaint... Embroidered flowers weren't exactly in vogue for menswear. I wasn't quite sure whether or not this counted as an act of mischief.

But, well, I supposed it was better than the cutesy kitten she'd sewn the other day. Of course, I wouldn't dare complain about a small stitched ornament that was out of sight. I offered a brief nod of thanks and changed into my newly fixed clothes.

I carefully shifted my weight with each step to descend the creaky stairs without a sound and was greeted by the smell of a smoldering stove. Breakfast was already served on the table in my small kitchen.

Thin slices of rye bread were nothing new, but the sunny-side up egg and cannellini beans accompanying them were a rare sight in Rhine. In the remote islands of the far north, where the people were said to have more pronounced cheekbones than us in the Empire, this was a dish that regularly came up in their taverns. Both the plated food and the mug of red tea were piping hot, as if they'd only just finished cooking.

"Mm...yum. This is great."

Sharing my opinion of the meal was crucial. While the Fraulein may have started doing this out of goodwill, there was no telling how quickly her mood would sour if I began acting like this was a right and not a privilege. Lady Agrippina's teachings and my own personal experience with alfar led me to believe that blundering my relationship with this silkie was the last thing I should ever do.

"Thank you, Ashen Fraulein, for your kindness and the wonderful meal."

Once I'd finished expressing my gratitude, I quietly prepared my offering to

the protector of the house. While I had no idea how long our relationship would last, goodwill is best met with goodwill—but not too much. Overdoing it would send me straight to a dimly lit hill to join an eternal folk dance.

I'd purchased cream the night prior to make sure I wouldn't forget in the morning; I poured out one cup's worth and left it beside the stove. While I felt guilty repaying work fit for an aristocrat with this pitiful offering, Ursula had given me very specific instructions about how this was to be done.

This was a vivid example of yet another troublesome aspect to dealing with fairies: a mortal's attempt to honor them could easily be taken as an offense. Extravagant gifts were out of the question. If tradition dictated that I was to say my thanks quickly and leave her a cup of fresh cream, then a tinge of guilt was my burden to bear.

However, I noted that the Fraulein had a sweet tooth—sweeter creams always disappeared more quickly—and thus occasionally “forgot” candy on the dining table. I didn't know if she was just excusing my bad manners, but she always ate the forgotten candies as a prank, so to speak.

With breakfast happily concluded, I set off for the College. It was a ten minute run from home, making it the perfect warm-up to start my day. I jogged along, taking in the comfortable temperature of the summer morning and the bright rays of the rising sun.

As I did, I passed by a handful of students walking from building to building, casting spells and throwing pebbles at windows for their part-time jobs. In an era without alarm clocks, these knocker-uppers were vital in their role of waking the sleepy townspeople for a productive morning. The mildly pleasant sound of tapping glass echoed in my ears as I reached the College campus, where I weaved past enthusiastic students and bored professors to reach the stables.

The stables were home to all manner of beasts of burden owned by the magia, and the salaried stablehands were already hard at work. As an aside, these workers weren't mages or anything, so dangerous demibeasts (primordial creatures that shared an organ with demonfolk) were not kept here.

That said, the place housed a massive unicorn, so the regulations were

approximate at best. I didn't know which professor kept that utter beast, but he *always* picked a fight with me. Every time I passed by, the fat brute tried to chomp on my hair. If I ever found out who the owner was, they were due for a strongly worded letter.

I said my hellos to the stablehands I'd begun getting along with and started caring for the two steeds who'd towed Lady Agrippina's carriage. In a shocking twist, they were real thoroughbred warhorses, and not the product of the madam's magic. According to her, what can be resolved with coinage ought to be. I had hardly been able to believe those were the words of a woman who tossed around disgustingly powerful spells for the most mundane tasks, but I'd known better than to put that into words.

I hauled in water and fodder, cast Clean on the inside of the stable, and changed out their bed of hay. Last but not least, I carefully brushed the tall stallions with my own two hands. They enjoyed this bit more than anything else, so I made it a point to only use my Hands as footholds to reach their backs.

We'd spent three months on the road together; how could I *not* get attached to them? A trusty steed was key to any good adventure, and my years of caring for Holter back home had left me with a deep affection for horses. In fact, I'd secretly given these two names—though only because Lady Agrippina's insistence on referring to them as “the horses” was too sad for me to bear.

The two were brothers by blood, so I christened them after the twin heroes of Castor and Polydeukes. There were certainly some hiccups in the source material, but I thought the notion of eternal friendship through fraternity suited them well. Since both of them took a liking to their gallant names and happily responded when I called for them, the names seemed to work out.

“Oh, *again*?”

I tried to comb through their manes only to find that their hair had been transformed into a massive collection of perfect braids. The local alfar had recognized the pair as *my* horses, marking them as a target for this sort of mischief. As splendid as they looked, unraveling all the braids was a massive pain. Today's prank would take me half an hour to undo, and that was with all my Hands working in tandem.

“Don’t just sit there with that satisfied face of yours. Can’t you shoo them off or something?”

The Dioscuri looked proud, eager to flaunt their stylish hairdos, so I didn’t get too upset. Using magic for complex tasks was a good way to accumulate experience, so I managed to convince myself that the hassle was worth it.

A while later, I finished my daily routine with Castor and Polydeukes and set up shop. Stablehands done with their work paid two assarii for me to Clean off the oils and feces that littered the stables. While the pay wasn’t much, my service was so popular that people had begun waiting in line as of late. Nobody wanted to head to their next job covered in sweat and smelling of dung. Paying a couple of pennies to feel fresh at work was an easy sell.

On my end, casting spells on a lot of customers was a good way of earning experience. Factoring in the goodwill I earned in the process, this business killed three birds with one stone. Building up a strong reputation was never a waste—outside of stealth missions, that is.

I took a sip of the chilled water one of my clients treated me to as I stepped into the elevator to Lady Agrippina’s laboratory. I entered and quickly changed into my doublet by the front door before stepping into the living room. Elisa reacted to my entrance with astounding speed, hurtling straight into my chest.

“Dear Brother!”

“Hey, now,” I said. “How many times have I told you that it’s dangerous to hug me while you’re flying?”

Elisa’s speech had significantly improved since the days we spent in Konigstuhl, but I was more worried about catching her. She jumped on my neck with a lot of momentum, so I had to hunker down and use supporting Hands to maintain my balance.

“But, but!” Elisa pouted.

“Aw, you’re so spoiled, you.” Although I pretended to be troubled, I still happily doted on her to the best of my ability.

The madam had happily announced that Elisa’s academic intake had sped up exponentially ever since the incident at the lakeside manor. This progress was

likely the reason Lady Agrippina had refused to let me stay in the sizable apprentice's chambers, going out of her way to purchase a lodging in the low quarter for me.

Elisa was my sister. She was also a changeling—that is, the fundamental pretext behind her existence as an organism was, in and of itself, something akin to conceptual magic. Thus, we were able to tell that her idea of being a “sister” and “daughter” was more important to her than anything else.

Somewhere at the crux of her soul, Elisa desired to be the cute princess that her family fawned on. For a being birthed from a fairy's longing for human love, this was a matter of course. It followed that she'd learned slowly when I was by her side; weakness and immaturity were tickets to further protection. Her failures allowed her to better play the part of the baby sister, and the fey portion of her heart had been pulling her mental faculties back. While that was all well and good for a young child in a rural canton, she had been born to a great deal of arcane talent. That was why she and I were here in the first place.

I have no doubt that the madam knew exactly what she was doing. Once I'd been sent to the low quarter, Lady Agrippina had told Elisa that she'd need to become a first-rate magus to live with me again. According to our master, Elisa's growth following this verbal prod was a thing to marvel. When revisiting an etiquette textbook that she'd completely failed to read in the past, Elisa had memorized the entire thing in *one* day, and now drank her soup gracefully without so much as a slurp. My sister didn't cry at night anymore, and she could even go to the bathroom by herself.

If I were to translate Elisa's ability into my own terms, her mastery of the palatial tongue was around Scale II. Lady Agrippina said it wouldn't be too many years before she was ready to attend public lectures at the College.

Seeing my baby sister take her first step toward independence filled me with equal parts joy and loneliness. She still begged me to pamper her though, and I needed to address my bad habit of indulging her. I knew fawning on her was hindering her growth, but I just couldn't help myself.

I played with Elisa for a short while before asking, “What have you been learning?” to prompt a review session. Just a week ago, her response had been

slow and meandering, but now she could organize the ideas in her head and form sentences that were easy for the listener to comprehend. I knew it: our little angel had been a genius all along. Someday, she was going to leave her mark on history as one of the greatest professors the College had ever seen.

“And then I learned about the Founding Emperor, and his story is really amazing! Master says that he was the youngest prince from a really small kingdom. Can you believe that?”

I surmised from her recollection that Elisa had studied history the day before. While the subject didn't sound that important for a magus at first glance, the advances of magecraft were interwoven with the social, political, and cultural details of the times.

Further, the College itself had been founded by the very statesman Elisa was now flapping her hands over in excitement: Richard, the Emperor of Creation. With all the bureaucratic work the magia partook in, a grasp of history was a must.

The questions of why a spell was devised and how the needs of its users shaped its advancements were a prerequisite for the magia's quest to leave their knowledge for future generations. Reading through the development notes of useful spells and cantrips were part of the research that they so highly valued, and history was an absolute necessity for anyone even remotely close to engaging with high society.

When state documents were (for some ungodly reason) filled with historical allusions and some of the key figures still roamed the Empire to this day, it was imperative to avoid stepping on any verbal landmines. One misplaced historical citation and you could expect anything from “That man was my greatest political rival. You dare to praise his name before me?” to “I'll have you know he is a distant relative of mine. Shall I take your disregard of his character as a personal slight?”

The most ridiculous of lies can lead to a war, so it only follows that the chronicles of history are a hotbed of strife. All in all, I was just glad to see my talented little sister building up the foundation for her life as a future noble.

Still dangling from my neck, Elisa merrily prattled on about the Founding

Emperor Richard—I knew how the stories went, but being a good listener is one of a brother’s greatest joys—and I prepared breakfast while nodding along. I say that, but “prepared” is a strong word, considering that I simply readied the table with premade dishes.

I’m sure any indoorsman will understand that, at times, people will accidentally forgo food and sleep in favor of hobbies or work. Eccentric mensch already scrape by on the bare minimum calories, refuse to bathe, and trap their waste in bottles to save the precious travel time it would take to walk to the restroom. I’m sure you can already see what might happen with races that don’t require food and sleep, or can otherwise substitute them with mana.

Extreme magia cooping up in their laboratories was about as surprising as a snail carrying a shell on its back. Thus, the many personal studios built under Krahenschanze each contained a small elevator in the kitchen used exclusively for sending supplies to the resident.

Restaurant workers then went door to door, taking orders to be sent using this delivery unit so that the lazy magia wouldn’t starve themselves. Lady Agrippina would never cook, and I could only whip together simple campfire meals, so we’d been relying on this service ever since we arrived in Berylin.

After all, mealtime was an important opportunity for Elisa to learn the table manners of the upper class. Her mannerisms had to be effortless to get by in the real world, so these ready-made meals were a necessity for her education.

“Be good and sit still,” I said.

“Mmkaaay,” Elisa replied, clearly still wanting to talk.

I left my sister in the living room and knocked on the door to the workshop proper. No response. I knocked again, this time receiving the faintest of answers from within.

“Excuse me,” I said as I entered.

“Mm, good morning.”

Stepping into the greenhouse Lady Agrippina called a laboratory, I found the owner of the room rolled out on the hammock in the middle of the room, her thin nightgown sprawled out on the floor. I was almost certain that she’d flung

it off in frustration at how it clung to her skin, but knowing how deplorable her character was didn't make it any easier for my eyes to find a place to rest.

Actually, on closer inspection, literally nothing in the room had moved since I'd left yesterday, save the positions of a handful of books. She'd spent the day the exact same way as every other day of the past two weeks: in her hammock. Was there any other creature in this entire world as slothful as her? Even sleep-loving drakes would at least *budge*.

"Madam, breakfast is served."

"Hmm," she said in contemplation. "I'm not quite in the mood today. Just fetch me some red tea, would you?"

Like there's ever a day you're in the mood to eat. I kept my cynical thoughts to myself and bowed at her order, quickly readying her tea. Since she first holed up in her lab, Lady Agrippina only ate at lunchtime when the thought of consumption struck her fancy. Mostly, she subsisted on tea and tobacco. Her diet bore a striking resemblance to that of the college students of my bygone days, but the fact that hers was a deliberate choice spurred on by indolence made it all the worse.

I placed the brewed tea on the table next to the madam's hammock. She didn't so much as glance away from her book to cast the Unseen Hand that lifted the cup to her lips.

"...A tad bitter," Lady Agrippina said. "It would seem you've let the leaves steep a spell too long."

"My apologies. I will keep that in mind."

My master gave me both a complaint and a means for improvement after a single sip. *Hmm, maybe I should get a proper brewing skill instead of the simple seasoning skill I have now...*

It had been less than half a year since I'd left the countryside to become a servant, and that was nowhere near enough for a farm boy to serve a cup capable of impressing a noble. Accordingly, Lady Agrippina seemed not to mind; on the brewer's end, though, I wanted her to enjoy my work. After all, the value of my work was directly linked to how quickly I chipped away at Elisa's tuition.

I spent a moment considering how I ought to use my experience points while organizing the madam's books—recently, I could tell whether or not she'd read one just by how it was placed amongst the piles of its kind—and preparing Elisa's desk for a round of study. Her lectures were conducted here, with her desk facing the hammock and her master lazing about in it.

Of note was the fact that Lady Agrippina continued reading completely unrelated books throughout each of her lessons. I suppose I should have expected nothing less.

"Oh," the madam said as I finished up, "you may eat before you leave."

I couldn't decide whether I was grateful or not to receive her unwanted meal, but I accepted all the same. I slipped out of the workshop, and Elisa was positively thrilled that we were going to eat together. After refilling my mental gauge with my angelic sister, I readied myself for my next job.

Good food, a wonderful roommate, and a happy little sister were all I needed to give color to my days of servitude.

[Tips] The imperial capital is home to a restaurant whose target audience is the busy magia cooped up in the laboratories under Krahenschanze. Every day, the servers take their clients' orders and deliver the food from their nearby establishment.

The restaurant supplies a greater variety of dishes than a noble could hope to eat—everything from simple dishes to be eaten while working to banquet dinners. Many of their customers order three meals a day, and it goes without saying that Agrippina is a power user.

With my morning duties finished, I sauntered down the main hall of the castle. Recently, the people here had begun to remember my name and face; receiving the occasional greeting put me in good spirits.

I took an open seat meant for visitors in an unpopulated corner of the hall. The morning rush of students was long gone, and I myself only had one reason for being here. A staff member began walking in my general direction holding a stack of papers. Her destination was none other than the quest board.

The sight of her magically posting dozens of papers onto the board was straight out of the fantasy tales I had once let take over my life. I recalled a memory of a scout dipping into thievery in the name of pilfering the best quests; some of my GMs had determined the difficulty of the session with a LUK check at bulletins like these. The joys and sorrows of seeing those dice fall swelled up once more within me. I'm sure the same was true for all of the people that gathered here in search of work.

The employee finished posting the last sheet and took a moment to look over her work. She walked away satisfied, and I immediately...continued to sit. There were official College students that had been patiently waiting, just like me.

My standing around here was rather dubious. I was the servant to some methuselah researcher that had been out on an expedition for over two decades, the brother to said methuselah's formal disciple, and the favorite pet of my school's dean. I had no trouble understanding that my public image was nothing but strange.

Any decent student would harbor some amount of distaste for a person like me who defied all rhyme and reason. The job bulletin was meant for enrolled students, and I would unquestionably draw even more ire if I went around snatching up all the best work.

My reservations were a show of good faith in order to preserve harmony and avoid being driven out by my peers. This whole program had been developed to help *them* pay the bills, and I knew acting the part of an overly zealous outsider would only lead to unsavory rumors.

Admittedly, it would be trivial to abuse my powerful connections or to shut up the competition with a flash of swordplay, but that was the work of a two-bit villain. Any moron who would do such things was the same kind of person that the PCs took advantage of midway through a campaign, or worse, the type to get killed off near the closing act just for fun. Knowing how the tropes played out, I wished to abstain from that sort of foolishness.

I'd acted out countless thugs and baddies in my time as a GM, but those characters had been made from the outset with the express purpose of being refreshing targets for my players to cut down. I didn't enjoy annoying the PCs in

and of itself.

Also, the thought of an annoying brat showing up like the son of a general store merchant and butting heads with a bunch of children who hadn't done anything wrong was just *stupid*. I was an adult inside, and cheering the hardworking kids on from afar was the mature thing to do. That said, I had no qualms teaching them a life lesson if they tried to get involved with me.

"Heya, Erich. Wonderful morning, don't you think?"

Of course, that offer only stood for the bad kind of involvement.

"Hey, Mika. Good morning to you too. No lecture today?" I said casually (he'd asked me to cut the stuffy language on our second meeting).

"The professor was apparently quite the star at yesterday's banquet," he said, smoothly sitting next to me with a smile.

Mika's mannerisms and speech were so overwhelmingly cool that I'd started wondering lately whether he was this world's protagonist. If not, then he might have been one of the romantic interests in a girl's dating sim.

However, I hadn't been able to bring myself to ask a question as crass as "So are you a boy or a girl?" We were on pretty good terms by this point, but I still wasn't sure.

"I see," I said. "So your lecturer had a flash of genius at yesterday's dinner party?"

"Yep," Mika replied. "I bet he's gazing at a whole new horizon right about now. All while drowning in a sea of bedsheets."

Being bureaucrats, magia attended many a banquet and feast, and having a flash of genius was a palatial euphemism implying Mika's teacher was sick in bed with a terrible hangover. Someone must have jokingly said something to the effect of "A nobleman of the proud Trialist Empire, bedridden due to an excess of drink? Certainly not. Surely he must be preoccupied with an ingenious new theory..." I had to say, I loved this sort of sarcastic humor.

"All right, the crowd's clearing out," Mika said. "Shall we set off, Sir Erich?"

"But of course, Sir Mika. Onward, to earn another day's keep."

We exchanged overblown lines and both broke out into snickers as soon as we got up. I forgot which of us had started it, but this sort of banter had become our bread and butter.

We'd discovered that we shared a love for sagas, and spent one of our few rest days at the town square listening to the minstrels. If I remembered correctly, our little games of wordplay had begun in the conversation that followed; we'd gotten incredibly fired up about the tales we'd heard that day. It seemed that no matter the world, lovers of knowledge were also lovers of quotation; ever since that day, we'd worked the language of poetry into our small talk as a form of play.

Personally, I was having a blast. I could only hope that he'd be able to say the same in ten years or so. It would be a shame if he ended up beating the feathers out of a pillow in embarrassment when he looked back at our conversations.

"Oh," I said. "There's a request for herb gathering. I wonder why they went out of their way to specify that the herbs have to be wild?"

"Hmm... I've heard that some herbs have different effects when they're cultivated in overfertilized soil. Hey Erich, how about this? This one shouldn't be too tough."

"Sorry, I can't do anything that takes multiple days. I've got work in the morning and at night."

"Ah, you're right. It's a bit far. Then let's go with that herb job of yours. I've been meaning to sign up for a botany lecture sometime. I would be most honored to receive your instruction."

The boy's dramatic flair and equally stylish gesture sold me on the quest. This was another facet of our wordplay. Unlike Heinz, Mika had been strongly moved by the tale of a magician creating a mystical bridge for the hero to cross a violent river. Naturally, the lines he came up with tended to be extra pompous.

Frankly, I didn't mind since he pulled it off so well. Still, I would need to warn him in the near future not to engage in our act around women. Lines like that delivered by a handsome young man were sure to cause all sorts of

misunderstandings.

“Let me see,” I said. “Fennel, wormwood, dill, and honeysuckle?”

“That sounds more like a liquor than a potion,” Mika said. “Should we toss in some saffron while we’re at it?”

“That’d be hilarious, but... No, the delphinium listed here is a poison. Oh, and aconite too? Try fermenting something like that, and you’ll have something that’ll make a *dvergar* froth at the mouth.”

Flipping over the request sheet, we looked at the prices offered for cleanly picked herbs (with undamaged roots) and tried to guess what the client was going to use them for. They were all plants that could be found in the forests surrounding Berylin, but that wasn’t enough information to come up with a convincing theory. It was well within reason that the requester just wanted to stock up on useful herbs, but turning the possibilities over in our minds was both fun and edifying. We tossed the names of countless liquors and herbs back and forth as we walked, until we finally reached the stables.

The imperial capital had been carved out of a politically convenient patch of land. Outside of a small farming zone and a few kilometers’ worth of open space, all of the land surrounding its outer walls was covered in trees. Apparently, this was a strategic barrier to prevent enemy armies from setting up large camps to lay siege. As a result, logging was banned in most of the conservancy.

However, the only thing that one couldn’t harvest was *trees*. The College used this to its advantage, and the story went that early mages of the College planted all sorts of useful herbs from every corner of the world in the woods. Back in those days, they had yet to develop the means to cheaply and efficiently construct herb gardens, and the mages had given it their all to ensure their plants would flourish despite being far removed from their natural habitat.

In the present day, the work of our predecessors lived on in the abundance of herbs in the forest. The great magia of yore had tinkered with the environment, and their innumerable spells continued to offer a safe haven for any and every type of plant to bloom.

Or at least, that was what Mika had told me when he’d first introduced me to

the forest. His passion for the joy of learning had come through in spades during his speech, and I vividly remembered all the details to this day.

With a place like that nearby, any sort of herbal quest sent us straight here. Most of the conservancy was totally unsupervised, so anyone was free to pick without cost, within reason. Plus, the close proximity to the capital meant the area was incredibly safe. The fact that I could make a round trip within a single day made the location a wonderful spot for both work and personal needs.

However, it was still a bit of a walk. Not wanting to waste too much time, we usually rode either Castor or Polydeukes to the forest—Lady Agrippina had given me free rein over them, seeing as she had no interest in putting them to work.

In my early youth, I'd leveled a Jockeying skill all the way to V: Adept in order to effectively steer Holter. I could've made do with the cheaper Beast Leading skill, since he was a cart horse, but...if they served the same purpose, I wanted to take the one with more future potential.

Looking back, I'd made the right call, if I do say so myself. The bonuses applied when I'd been manning the coachbox, and now I didn't need to worry about a means of travel.

Besides, the Dioscuri were hearty warhorses. If I didn't let them run around every now and again, they'd get stressed out and lose their edge. Only a select few homebodies could spend all day lazing around in bed without any damage to their psyche.

The two brothers vied for my attention in the hopes that I would choose them for our journey, and their infectious excitement caused a handful of other steeds to giddily try and swoop in for a trot. I calmed down the crowd and saddled up Castor, since I'd let Polydeukes accompany me on a training session the day before.

"Hey, wait, stop! Quit it!" Mika shouted. "You *again*?! I said stop! Ah, whoa, gross! Erich, lend me a hand!"

I stopped adjusting the saddle cinch and turned to see Mika being harassed by the same unicorn that always gave me grief. He wasn't being stabbed with a horn or anything, but the beast was chewing on his somewhat wavy hair, licking

him across the face, and at the end of it all, the stupid thing was trying to topple him over.

What's your deal? I don't know what we did, but can you stop bothering us every time we pass by? I wonder if there's a skill out there in the Faith category or something that'll let me get a Horse Speak spell as a mensch... Oh, I guess unicorns are technically demibeasts.

Hurrying over to help my friend did little good, and I ended up getting nibbled on too. We were absolutely filthy by the time a stablehand finally came over to help us. She had my sincerest thanks; it would be downright embarrassing to get a lasting wound on my face from a dumb horse.

"How'd that guy get his scar?" one person would ask. "Some stupid unicorn bit him," another would answer. Having a scar from a fierce battle was one thing; if I got laughed at after an exchange like that, I would die of indignation on the spot.

Mika and I cast Clean on each other, climbed onto Castor, and set off. Once Mika got good enough at handling horses to ride one on his own, it would be fun to head out on a longer journey with him.

For now, we loaded up on the same horse and made our way through town at a leisurely pace. Thankfully, pedestrians were used to dealing with horses amongst the foot traffic thanks to the messengers and forerunners the nobility employed. The citizens of Berylin dodged us with all the nonchalance of a modern Earth dweller sidestepping a cyclist.

"Oh," Mika said, pointing at an open-air stall. "Wanna buy lunch before we go, Erich?"

There were plenty of shops selling hot meals at this time of day. One could eat on a simple chair placed in front of the establishment or take the food home to enjoy elsewhere. My friend seemed rather keen on a freshly grilled skewer, and he proudly told me that his recently learned heat preservation magic would keep anything we bought warm until it was time to eat.

"Heh," I chuckled. "Today's a special day, old chum."

Alas, I pointed at my bag looking even prouder than he did. In it was a basket

of food I'd brought from Lady Agrippina's atelier and turned into a sack lunch.

What? The Ashen Fraulein had made me breakfast. The madam could offer me her portion, but I wasn't going to eat if I was full. Aristocratic meals were too excessive to finish alone anyway. I'd figured treating a friend to lunch was a justifiable move.

"I've got my employer's leftovers with me. White bread, freshly cooked sausages, a tasty-looking pottage, fancy dairy products, and a whole mountain of fruit. And after all that, it comes with a tiny bottle of wine too."

"That's incredible," Mika said. "How did you earn such a kingly reward?"

"Thing is, I serve a methuselah. A lot of the time, she doesn't eat just because she doesn't feel like it."

"Oh, so that's how it is... I guess I'll be looking forward to lunch then!"

We continued making small talk about our upcoming meal as we passed through the city gates and sped up to a light trot. Although our speed was comparable to a leisurely bicycle, the bounce of a horse's gait was a death sentence for the hips and butt of any inexperienced rider. Exhibit A: Mika was clinging onto my waist for dear life...and the pleasant smell I noticed as he did was a secret I would take to the grave.

The perimeter of the capital was a grassy field, and it was kept nicely level for the sake of the military exercises they held here every so often. Apparently, the people in charge of the landscaping were oikodomurges—the magus officers that handled large scale repairs and public infrastructure projects—that Mika one day hoped to join. For all his admiration for these arcane architects, though, my travel buddy was in no place to appreciate their work.

I noticed that Castor had been glancing my way over and over again. *Oh*, I thought. *You're begging, aren't you?* Now that the warm-up was over, he wanted to run at full speed.

"Mika, are you all right?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah!" he said. "Just fine, other than my aching back!"

"I thought I told you to use your hips to absorb the shock?"

“Don’t make it sound so easy!”

Ignoring his terrified shouting, I readied a Hand just in case and kicked Castor’s sides. A whinny echoed across the open grass, and the bold claps of his gallop melted together with a piercing wail.

[Tips] There is a one-libra fine for any horseback rider who travels the streets of the imperial capital at a speed greater than a walk.

“You get *really* pushy sometimes,” Mika said. “You know that?”

“Uh, well... Sorry.”

Castor was brimming with satisfaction, but in contrast, my friend was stuck on Castor’s back glaring down at me. I wanted to go on ahead to avoid his angry gaze, but Castor nibbled at the hand I was using to lead him.

*Stop it. We’re done running for the day. We just got scolded, remember?
...Okay, fine, it’s my fault. I’m sorry.*

I couldn’t help it; venturing out with a friend made me lose myself. Much like how I’d picked up skills and traits for the sake of foxes-and-geese, there was nothing I could do with my mind to overcome the childish wonder of my body.

This feeling of anything and everything being fun was not a new one: I’d felt it countless times when sitting at new tables and drafting up new parties. Explaining one’s own character while getting to know the PCs everyone else came up with was a treat like no other. The thought that *this* was the band of heroes that the ensuing adventure would revolve around was more exciting than anything I could imagine. This held especially true when my companion felt like a breath of fresh air no matter what we did—after all, Mika was archetypally different from everybody else around me.

I made my amends by promising him an extra portion of butter for lunch (at my expense), and we began scouting out the area to accomplish our task. Herbs were a staple for many magia, and broadly, there were two use cases for them: potions and catalysts.

As one might expect, potions stabilized the temporally challenged

phenomenon we called “magic” in a physical form. This concoction could be made of anything from herbs and minerals to chunks of flesh or fungus. Whatever the ingredients, they then went through a filtration process and were melted together with a spell to purify mana and create a potion.

The benefit to doing this was that the mana necessary for the spell to activate was not used instantaneously, unlike a normal casting. Further, potions seemed to warp the world less than magic, and thus their effects did not revert as quickly; in practice, this meant most concoctions held for ten to twenty years if well stored.

Perhaps the easiest illustration would be that of restorative potions. It went without saying that there were spells dedicated to the art of healing the body. The most fundamental restoration magic involved triggering the target’s immune system while stimulating surplus cell production, or increasing the patient’s ability to effectively metabolize medicine. These also happened to be the easiest medicinal spells to trap in a potion.

By infusing herbs with magic and then reducing the plants to an extract, mages magnified the effects of their spells and stabilized them in the form of a drug. In essence, these mystic apothecaries expended mana up front to prepare a spell for future use.

Since the magic of a potion was technically active from the time of creation, they were crafted with a “use” trigger built into the equations dictating how the spell activated. This led to the greatest boon of creating potions: a layman without any arcane knowledge could conjure up the effects of a spell, and it would be no different from a mage doing so. Whether the potion took the form of an ointment or a powder, all they had to do was use it in its intended way.

Additionally, potions were not *only* made with healing magic. With a bit of wit and the right ingredients on the creator’s end, any spell or cantrip could be theoretically fixed into a mystic concoction.

There was a potion for everything. Refined oils could harbor massive fireballs. Finely dusted ore could be imbued with an aspect of drying to speed up the construction of concrete and mortar. A flask of liquid could be made to vaporize upon contact with air at thousands of times its usual rate of evaporation.

Magia with little faith in their mana capacity thus mass-produced potions while they were full of vigor and stockpiled them for a rainy day. However, this was a massive drain on both time and money, so this style of combat was only a step removed from beating down enemies with sacks of gold. Alchemists were doomed to an expensive path in every system, it seemed.

Going back, the second use case was to use an herb as a catalyst. Much like the old magus who'd given me his ring many years ago, many mages chose to use expendable items to bolster their spells and cantrips.

For example, lighting a match was far easier than lighting a random twig, and a dried log would undoubtedly burn better than a damp one. In the same vein, catalysts were used to create more favorable conditions for a mage to work their magic.

Morphing a pinch of gunpowder into a firework was a simple task. Of course, an experienced mage could summon flashing lights out of thin air through sheer mastery, but they had no incentive to waste the extra mana and concentration to do so. Between a simple and easy method and a difficult and tiring one, few would ever go out of their way to choose the latter.

Therefore, mages carried about their business making great use of their crutches so they could more easily convince the world that their wondrous displays of incomprehensible power were consistent with the laws of reality. While I'm sure many mages had tried to replicate their own work without the training wheels of catalysts out of boredom at one point or another, the dozens of fireworks lords and magistrates wished to fire would quickly become backbreaking work without the tools of the trade.

Of course, some folks—my employer included—chose to brute force everything with their bottomless supplies of mana.

At any rate, today's task was to gather the materials needed for a potion. I followed the written instructions to a tee and dug up each plant with all the care of a scientist recovering a research specimen, making sure not to damage the roots. I didn't know what the requester was going to use these for, but one thing was certain: we were cheaper than the salesmen and herbalists that peddled their wares at the College.

Still, gathering normal herbs was easy work. Sometimes, these sorts of quests involved gathering really obnoxious plants, like one that lost all its mystic meaning if it didn't remain in the dirt it had grown in, or the flower that withered in two minutes if not kept in a flask full of a completely unrelated potion. Those sorts of missions paid out *gold* pieces, but nothing of the sort grew where a pair of children could wander off to pick herbs.

Riding atop Castor and Polydeukes was fun and all, but...man, I wanted space-bending magic. The power in being able to teleport long distances was hard to overstate. It was the type of ability to make the GM groan and complain that the whole session wouldn't work if one of the PCs had it.

Mika and I worked at it until a bit past noon, calling off our search for lunch around the time we'd each gathered a few silvers' worth of herbs. He was quick to learn and had swiftly picked up on the distinguishing features of each species and how to discern the quality of each plant. I suppose he was what one would usually imagine a model student to be like, but I couldn't help but feel like it wasn't very rewarding to teach him... My time with Elisa was getting to me.

"Hey, Mr. I-stopped-picking-herbs-in-favor-of-plums," he said.

"What was that? I couldn't hear you over the sound of all the strawberries you picked," I returned.

The two of us had finished lunch and were now leaning on a massive tree, snacking on the fruits of our labor for dessert. The shade and fruits were a welcome escape from the heat of midsummer, and the cool sensation of the air wicking away my sweat was one of the season's greatest pleasures. There was nothing better after a good bout of play.

"These are great," I said.

"Yup," he agreed.

Our eyes met and we burst out into a fit of laughter. This sort of pointless chitchat was just so unapologetically fun.

Suddenly, my Presence Detection skill kicked in. My brow twitched and I reached for the fey karambit stashed ever-ready in my sleeve, but the gentle presence gliding our way from the sky didn't seem hostile. In fact, what I'd

detected wasn't even alive.

"Whoa," Mika said. "It's a messaging bird. Haven't seen one of those in a while."

Our tiny visitor was a slip of paper that had been folded into the shape of a small bird, perfectly mimicking the movements of the real deal. I was intimately familiar with the artificial sparrow: another of its kind had come my way a week ago during my first "fashion show."

As expected, the origami bird landed atop my lap and unfolded itself to reveal a message. Stamped with Lady Leizniz's seal, the letter included a request for me to return to the runway and an offer to schedule my long-awaited library visit.

That's right, I still hadn't gone. Lady Leizniz had lost track of time so badly during my debut as a model that we had to push back our trip to the College's book vault. She must have realized that I'd been sulking over that, because this second solicitation offered to let me spend the whole of our time together in the library, with the only caveat being that I was to stop by that clothier's shop to change into an outfit of her choosing. In the letter, she asked if I was free in two days' time. Putting aside the disreputable nature of what she was inviting me *to*, her courtesy in asking a mere servant for permission to schedule reflected her high birth.

As I read through the message with a furrowed brow, Mika scanned me over—but didn't so much as glance at my private mail—and then sighed.

"The School of Daybreak is so...flashy," he said.

"Is the School of First Light not?" I asked.

"Well... At the very least, we're not supposed to use magic in any way that might catch the attention of laypeople."

All at once, I realized that I knew little to nothing about the different factions that made up the College. Since I wasn't going to become a magus myself, Lady Agrippina had cut her explanation short by saying all I needed to know was that the cadres were "not on the best of terms." However, at this point, my best friend in the imperial capital was an official student of another cadre, and my

curiosity took hold.

“Hey, ol’ buddy ol’ pal,” I said. “I know it’s a bit late to be asking this, but what are the differences between the cadres, anyway?”

“Huh?” Mika said. “No one told you about them?”

“I’m just an indentured servant. The madam I serve doesn’t plan to make me handle any political stuff, so she only taught me the bare minimum. Each faction has a different stance on magic or something, right?”

Mika put his hand on his chin with a contemplative groan. After a moment, he decided to give me a proper lecture and raised a finger as he began explaining.

“First, the original seven magia each founded a school of thought, and those are what we call the Major Seven. There are a bunch of offshoots for each, but you don’t have to worry about those. They just argue about minutiae anyway.”

With his index finger still outstretched, Mika started his rundown of the major factions with the School of First Light.

They posited that knowledge was a sin worse than ignorance when wielded by an imbecile, and accordingly wished to limit the spread of magic to the few. The great wealth of knowledge known as magecraft was a treasure to be shared with only those intellectuals that could use its powers for good: they dedicated every synapse of their sharpened minds to the gravely important process of selecting a successor, and only made their findings public after a careful screening to make sure any new spell was fit for the world to see.

Although the other factions laughed at the First Light hermits, their contributions to the field of magic rivaled that of the School of Daybreak. They publicized any breakthroughs that they thought would be to the benefit of all and believed in bettering quality of life, so they weren’t as introverted as some made them out to be.

Personally, I could sort of see where they were coming from. Morons were ever prone to misusing spectacular technology to cause hideous disaster. Even the best of inventions could cause catastrophe in the wrong hands, so the prudence to not show off every one of their findings struck a chord with me.

I’d seen a timeline in which brilliant minds converged to create a bomb so

powerful that even they urged for it not to be used, only for a politician without their expertise to go off and use it anyway. Having come from a world so overrun with idiocy, the words of First Light were rather compelling.

Mika's second finger was accompanied by the School of Daybreak. This was the rogue's den my employer and that terrible wardrobe coordinator belonged to.

My cadre was one that idealized prosperity through reason. The members of Daybreak championed the idea that if the next step on their path was off a steep cliff, all they needed to do was throw themselves into their research with the conviction that they could fly. These hyperrationalists were a crossbreed between scientists and wizards who bled on the cutting edge of discovery in the quest for the most beautiful and efficient discoveries. They published any finding that had a remote chance of marginally bettering the world in the name of their radically progressive love of innovation.

Naturally, they were a major contributor to the Empire's arcane superiority and enjoyed high status as a result. However, they simultaneously allotted vast swaths of their budget to the exploration of new ideas that would be—to put it lightly—utterly inexcusable for the world to see. Thus, despite their great prowess, they were a regular troublemaker in the Emperor's court.

“And that sort of makes them our biggest rival...” Mika mumbled.

While unfortunate, that was unavoidable. The two factions were practically destined to be mortal enemies. I could gather the three most genocidal dictators of Earth's history in a room, and they still wouldn't reach the same level of mutual animosity.

Next, Mika raised a third finger and spoke of the School of Midheaven. Their teachings dictated that what could be done with magic ought to be done with magic; what could not be done with magic ought not to be done with magic.

These centrists embodied the principle of “less is more” and believed best practice varied depending on the situation, whether that be the adoption of new magics or the appointment of new magia. Although some chided them as mere opportunists, they alone of all the Major Seven had no pronounced enemies. This earned them popularity with the conservative nobles of the

Empire, who faithfully offered financial support to what they saw as the only voice of conscience in the College.

With my friend's fourth finger came the School of Setting Sun, whose motto was "glory lies buried in the depths of the unrevealed." To them, magic was not a means to an end, but an end in and of itself. They valued deep understanding and placed great stock in the idea of the evolution of mankind.

Instead of developing new spells in the name of utility, they derived meaning directly from the act of study. By delving into the deepest secrets magecraft had to offer, the members of their collective sought to attain apotheosis. Where the Schools of Daybreak and First Light were a collection of mad scientists, the believers of the Setting Sun were essentially cultists.

You might think the Empire would be wise to chase out a band of lunatics congregating on its doorstep, but unfortunately these cuckoos were too valuable to let go. Amidst the sea of forbidden terrors that they dragged up during their studies, they also discovered legitimately useful spells. Things like limb regeneration and organ restoration had been developed off the backs of their progress—as well as the mangled corpses of convicted felons—and they wielded a great many patents that had to do with sanitation and hygiene. Taking them out of the picture was more trouble than it was worth.

The Setting Sun cultists were basically evil necromancers trying to attain immortality by playing with corpses all day. Tossing them out into the world would be a disaster for the innocent civilians going about their lives.

Noticing my revulsion, Mika added one more fact that only worsened the crinkle in my brow. Apparently, the School of Setting Sun was somewhat—nay, *very* concerned with efficiency. Their passion for discovery made them relatively close with the School of Daybreak.

Moving on to a totally opened hand, Mika introduced the School of Shimmering Dawn. Their beliefs revolved around the notion that magic could affect things beyond the realm of base reality—what they called the observable universe. Thus, they took magehood to be a path to enlightenment. While different in practice from the methods of the Setting Sun, this school of thought similarly placed great emphasis on betterment via scholarship.

Historically, they'd been famed for their practice of concentrating on the flow of mana to peer into the past or future. As incredible as this prophetic ability sounded, the results of their clinical trials left something to be desired. Nowadays, they were seen as a group that had gotten a little too spiritual for their own good. While they retained some acclaim in niche circles for the major prophecies they foretold, opinion on the Shimmering Dawn oracles was divisive.

However, they also carried a tradition of writing philosophical treatises on the nature of people, magic, and the relation between them. In this realm, they were considered the sublime peak of thought; no faction could write them off as being mere screwballs.

“And these five are the basis for the Five Great Pillars that control the College today. The other two are the School of Scorching Sun and the School of Polar Night, but their cadres are tiny in comparison. I hear that they haven't been real players for the past century or so.”

Still, Mika bent down his index finger and explained the inner workings of the School of Scorching Sun. They were nerds of the truest sense, fixated on the idea that mastering magic alone would translate to mastery of everything else the universe had to offer.

Addicted to their notion of arcane preeminence, these fools had created a strange hodgepodge of guiding tenets. Despite showing signs of interest in research and development, they maintained more than any other faction that the peak of the craft was a view only the chosen few need gaze upon. In essence, these lovers of novelty were also staunch secret keepers.

However, their secrecy had gone too far, and their lack of verifiable contributions had been the key factor in their decline. The College was not philanthropic enough to fund an organization that failed to produce results, no matter how much authority it held. With no money to lure in new talent, they were stuck in a spiral of compounding failure. To add insult to injury, they were the Tendai Buddhists of this world: they'd made enemies of every other major faction, leaving them on a stranded island of political power.

At this point, I felt as though I'd peeked past a facade to see the ugly reality of the mystical castle where I worked.

“Finally, the School of Polar Night is the last of the Major Seven,” Mika said, pausing for a moment. “It’s kinda weird for me to say this, but these guys are *really* out there. This school is full of magia that don’t like magic.”

The last and perhaps most befuddling faction was said to have been founded on the concern that magic could leave irreversible scars on the very world itself. Poorly restrained spells and arcane tools overcharged with mana could run wildly out of control. Destruction of life and property was obviously a potential issue, and there was even a worry that lingering mana-based residue could continue to harm a region for long after an incident was resolved.

Scholars of Polar Night turned their attention to the dark side of what others considered an all-powerful tool. These magia thus came to the remarkably peculiar conclusion that the world would be better off without magic.

Their logic went like this: “There are already people living out their lives without magic. Meddling with something that could kill hundreds of thousands of people for our own gain is wrong! Yet seeing as there are already people who use magic as they please, it is our duty to use our knowledge of the art’s dangers to safeguard the world against its evils.”

Driven by this remarkably virtuous goal, the School of Polar Night specialized in purifying locations with residual mana and creating barriers that deflected other forms of magic. These anti-mage specialists’ existential pessimism led them to avoid social events within the magus sphere. While this caused their modern cadre to be smaller than its competitors, the imperial crown prized their talents as a tool of the state, and they enjoyed relatively high status for their size.

The rest of Collegiate society saw them as a group of thorny people lashing out in self-loathing. Apparently, most magia watched over them with endearment, like a main character smiling at a pouty love interest.

“And that’s the last of the Major Seven. What do you think?” After delivering a long spiel, Mika asked me for my opinion. Unfortunately, I was stuck on one thing.

“Why is every faction so *extreme*?”

“Ah, man... I figured you’d go there,” he said, slapping his forehead with an

awkward chuckle.

I knew from studying history that associations of people with the explicit goal of furthering some field of study were bound to have a screw or two loose, but the people running the College were so obsessive that I couldn't even laugh.

I was unbelievably grateful that my friend here had managed to stay on the path of a sincere gentleman despite spending his days surrounded by reprobates. I could only pray that he remained a refreshing beacon of normalcy amidst the sea of magical kooks.

"By the way," Mika said, "aren't you going to reply? It looks like it wants you to."

"Oh, whoops."

I'd let my curiosity get the better of me and had completely forgotten about Lady Leizniz's letter. The white sheet on my lap was slapping me with its flimsy corner, as if to say, "Hurry up! Write your reply already!"

Not having any plans in particular, I took the chunk of charcoal that came with the paper bird and wrote a reply saying that I was free. As soon as I finished, the origami creature refolded itself and flew off into the sky.

"I still think it's kinda showy," Mika said, "but I guess being invited out with a letter like that would steal any lady's or gentleman's heart."

"Ha ha, then I guess I'm the lone exception. I *really* don't want to go."

As we watched the paper familiar fly away, I was struck by a sudden revelation: no matter what the future held, I needed to keep this handsome young man away from my benefactor at all costs.

[Tips] The Schools of Daybreak and First Light are each other's greatest rivals.

As we finished up our lunch, we prepared to head home so as not to return too late. This time, Mika took Castor's reins to prevent me from letting him run wild again. My experience on the way here made me hesitate before I grabbed

hold of his waist, but the classic “You were a girl this whole time?!” trope was nowhere to be found.

His waistline and the set of his hips were markedly unfeminine. No matter how tomboyish a girl might be, this wasn’t the sort of thing someone could fake. I could dress up in my best drag, but one look at my collar, waist, or knees would get me clocked. Greatly relieved, I made some small talk about how obnoxious sweat became as the weather warmed.

“By the way, Erich, do you plan on growing out your hair?” Mika asked, looking at the relatively long strands clinging to my damp skin.

I’d stopped cutting it for extra brownie points with my alfish companions, and I was still powering through despite how obnoxious it was. It was growing extremely fast—though I wasn’t sure if that was natural or the product of fey interference—and the short cut I’d left Konigstuhl with now flowed down past my shoulders. I’d once heard that hair growth rates correlated with sexual perversion, but...I wanted to believe otherwise. I mean, I’d never even let my campaigns dip into that sort of thing. Seriously!

“Yeah,” I answered. “There’s some kinda mystic thing to it too, right?”

“Yup,” Mika said. “Long hair is second only to mana stones when it comes to catalyzing spells and storing magical power. Apparently it’s not as effective for men, but that’s why you see female mages walking around with really long hair.”

Come to think of it, all of the busted characters I knew of had grown out their hair. Lady Agrippina needed magic just to keep hers in order; although Lady Leizniz’s appearance was frozen at her time of death, her impressive brunette locks went down past her hips.

Does that mean I have to grow mine out that long? Seems like a pain...

Unseen Hands made braiding trivial, but a hairstyle like that would be a bit much in a bathhouse. Letting it all float freely atop the water was out of the question, and bundling it all up on my head would be heavy.

“How long are you thinking?” Mika asked.

“Maybe halfway down my back at most,” I said.

“That sounds great. I’m sure it’ll suit you with how smooth your hair is. In fact, you already looked like a heartthrob when you worked up a sweat today.”

...This might be an unwarranted concern, but I was beginning to worry about this young man’s future. What was buttering me up going to accomplish? And why did he have to go out of his way to use such romantic language? Had I been a girl, I would’ve been on track to be the leading lady of his story.

Man, that’s scary... It’s just not fair how good hot people’ve got it.

“Your hair is pretty remarkable too,” I said, hoping to deflect embarrassment back at my handsome friend. “Hardly anyone can boast a shade of black as lustrous as yours. How do you take care of it?”

“I wash up in the bath like anyone else.” I could tell from the faint blush on the back of his neck that I’d managed to turn the tables. “I can’t afford hair oils, but I do put down a bit of cash for some soap. And what about you?”

“Me?” I said. “All I do is rinse my hair at public bathhouses and let it air dry.”

“...You better not say that in front of a woman.” Mika’s final, strangely genuine warning made me realize that we’d never gone to bathe together before.

Berylin was home to *seven* whole public bathhouses! Of them, two were totally free to enter on account of being a gift to the populace from the imperial crown. Another charged a mere five assarii for entry to a large and relaxing bath. I could even splurge twenty assarii to enjoy a whole array of different tubs; the city certainly catered to my bath-loving tendencies.

The remaining three establishments served members of the upper crust, so the closest I’d gotten to experiencing what they offered was gazing at the buildings from afar. Two were closer to high-end spa resorts than bathhouses, requiring large silver pieces just to get in, and I swore that I’d knock on their gates to experience their epicurean luxury firsthand should I ever make it big. The last enterprise was a tad *specialized*, so it was far too early for me to go. But, well, I couldn’t deny having *any* interest in it.

“Hey, Mika,” I said. “Want to head to the baths when we get back? We worked up a good sweat, and it just isn’t the same to clean ourselves off with

magic alone.”

“Huh?” he said. “Oh, a bath? Sorry...I’m not really a fan of bathing in groups.”

Unfortunately, my invitation to naked brotherhood spurred on by brilliant epiphany was shot down. According to Mika, he liked to spend his time alone, steeping in the hot water with outstretched legs and a meditative mind. Much like the lonely old men who preferred to sample gourmet dishes solo, this dashing young boy preferred to partake in his hot springs in the comfort of privacy.

Frankly, that sounded like a perfectly relaxing time, and I wasn’t in the business of gatekeeping another’s tastes. Further, if we went in separately and only conversed after leaving the bath, there wasn’t any point to going together to begin with.

Knowing that overstepping my bounds would do me no good, I dropped the conversation and moved on to getting Mika used to handling a horse. We sped up to a brisk trot, and the lurching sun was finally at our backs by the time Castor’s hooves touched down on the streets of Berylin.

Our steed was content after a full day of exercise, and we dropped him off at the stables before heading to Krahenschanze with the plants we’d fetched. We found the College halls filled with a chattering crowd of students who were there to turn in their work for the day, just like us.

“Nice and lively,” I said. “What do you think our herbs are going to be used for?”

“Well,” Mika mused, “I’d prefer they further our understanding of the depths of magic, instead of setting off some brewer’s flash of genius.”

We killed time in line joking around until it was our turn to hand over our request sheet and the corresponding goods to the receptionist. The clerk collected our bounty with a smile and went so far as to give us each a piece of candy filled with honey. These small drops were surely a vital part of the receptionists’ preparations to keep their voices from dying on the job, and having finished a long day of work myself, the sweet flavor soaked into my tired body.

Getting back on track, one began a quest by bringing a request to this counter and ended it much in the same way. The appraisal of our goods and subsequent payment were also handled by the receptionists to dissuade senior students from coercing young kids to run around as their gofers. This preventative means was no theoretical countermeasure: a past incident had gotten to the brink of dean-on-dean combat before the then-emperor stepped in to mediate. Not even the Kamakura samurai had been honor bound enough for the leaders of factions to prepare for war over a literal children's squabble.

Further evidence for the natural barbarism of all thinking beings aside, the clerk handed us a wooden check; our haul's appraisal was pending and we were to come back to receive our reward in a day or so. Still rolling our honey drops on our tongues, we thanked the receptionist and made our leave.

"All right," I said, "I'm off to take a bath before my nightly duties."

"Sounds good," Mika said. "I'm going to hit the books to review all the stuff you taught me today. See you again."

Thus, Mika and I went our separate ways in front of the College. It was already evening, though the lateness of the summer sunset made it difficult to believe. My night shift was approaching, and cleaning up before work was more than manners: it was a mark of civility as a human being.

What was more, two weeks of life here had given me insight into what Lady Agrippina had meant when she'd called Krahenschanze a vain castle in the capital of vanity. Knowing what I knew now, I was neither stupid nor self-defeating enough to turn a blind eye to the important task of playing along.

I stopped by home to grab a towel, bucket, and scrubber (basically a metal stick) and headed for the bathhouse. My walk there was more than illustrative as to why this city had been built: Berylin was just *too* clean.

Of course, the smaller urban centers we'd visited on the trek here had been plenty sanitary. The Trialist Empire enforced nationwide mandates for the creation of sewer systems and aqueducts in its cities. On top of this, there were even imperially maintained public restrooms (though admittedly their upkeep consisted of shovelers who manually cleaned out the things). Rhine was a far cry from what I'd imagined a city of Dark Ages Europe to look like.

Yet all that could not hold a candle to the capital. No other city could boast of wells and drinking fountains at every turn, and only metropolises with more than twenty thousand citizens were granted a public bath that ran on the emperor's dime. Smaller cities had plenty of smelly residents who refused to cough up the pennies it took to regularly wash up.

However, Berylin had none of these problems. The streets were kept clean by *magia* for whom city sanitation was their full-time job, and there were *two* public baths that the crown offered free of charge. The message was as clear as it was entirely founded on vanity: those who refused to bathe were not *worthy* of dwelling in the capital.

Lady Agrippina had explained that this metroplex had been built for diplomatic purposes. Naturally, it followed that the airs weaponized in the battlefield of social etiquette would be used to their fullest. To flaunt its ability to indulge in luxuries was a state's greatest show of power.

Who could ever bow down to a small ruler in a pathetic palace overlooking a filthy capital? What looked to be an excess of embellishment, an overly shaggy carpet, or grossly overdone hospitality at first glance were all calculated political plays. The capital burned the glory of its leader into the minds of its subjects and asked all those beyond its realm, "Do you dare make an enemy of a nation that can afford *this*?"

Ostentation was a splendid weapon on the world stage, and Rhine knew this well. A country that could no longer keep up its image was easy pickings, and today's Berylin reflected this principle by putting its absurd level of sanitation on full display just as it always did.

I was more than happy to take advantage of it. The closest bathhouse to the Mages' Corridor was on a low street and catered to local manual laborers. Had I come a bit later, the place would have been flooded with people clocking out for the day, so I'd come just in time to enjoy a near-empty bath without any time limits for how long I could soak. Even the most soothing water couldn't heal the soul if I were to be packed into the bath like a sacked potato.

I flashed a wooden slate to the guard to prove my Berylinian citizenship—the perpetual jangle in my pocket from all the slabs they gave out for every little

thing was this city's one downfall—and he handed me a key to a locker. Being an unpaid establishment, the expectation was for one to guard their own valuables.

Tossing my things into a flimsy container that was one easy Strength check from busting open, I quickly slipped out of my clothes. The cheap make of the security made me think these lockers were meant to gauge capacity more than they were to protect our property.

To be fair, a thief prying open the gate to my things would, at most, win a few copper pieces I'd brought to buy dinner. One look at the sort of clientele this establishment served was enough to know any possible return wasn't worth the risk of being chained up (the exemplary punishment for this kind of theft was to live one's life with bound hands and feet).

I ducked through the narrow doorway into a dimly lit world of steam. The imperial crown's bathhouse was simpler than its magnificent size would lead you to believe. Countless windows cut up to the towering ceiling to flood the space with summer sun, which filtered through the vapors billowing up from the water. Below, the baths themselves were inhabited by a handful of men who had evidently come to let the comfortable pools melt their fatigue and troubles away.

Three separate basins sprawled out before me: cold, lukewarm, and hot water filled each one, respectively. This was an extravagance I could've never imagined back in the canton. After scrubbing down my body, I first hopped into the hot bath to loosen up my muscles and skin.

"Hnnng... Ahh."

Vain purposes aside, the bath was good. In truth, we commoners cared little for the conniving reasons behind the lengths the powers that be went to in order to indulge us. More importantly, I had something on my mind that I'd meant to think about since noon.

I let the warm water envelop me. Any more relaxation and I would inadvertently begin floating. I gazed up at the faraway ceiling and opened up my character sheet to see the day's progress.

"Now then...what shall I do?"

Three months prior, the end of the winter storm that accompanied my mistake had given me more experience than I'd dared dream of. Serious training begot serious results, but this incident hammered home the notion that life-and-death battles were even bigger paydays.

With my current stock, I was at the precipice of a true peak... I could bring my Dexterity from VII: Exceptional to IX: Divine Favor with change to spare. But on the other hand, I could dump everything into Hybrid Sword Arts to go from VI: Expert to IX: Divine in one fell swoop, and the choice was killing me.

I'd been stunned to the point of falling out of bed when I'd first checked my stats. The numbers I'd likened to a hellish mobile game grind had fallen within reach. I could only guess that my unbreakable resolve to push through countless wounds stacked with bonuses stemming from Helga's innate difficulty as an encounter, only to filter through Child Prodigy's disgusting magnification. My gains this time around were clearly too much for me to hope for an encore.

In the past, I would've racked my brain over my two Scale IX options...but now my array of choices was wider.

One: I could continue polishing my strengths.

Two: I could shore up my weaknesses.

Three: I could reach out for something new.

Among these, the second and third choices would resolve themselves in two days' time. I hadn't been able to focus on my work with Mika since I'd received Lady Leizniz's letter. Call me a bad friend if you'd like, but only those who had never refused an invitation in the name of playing a newly purchased game have the right to look down on me.

How can a power gamer with a fully loaded bank of experience points ever hope to resist the temptation to throw life to the wayside? With my blood flowing from the hot bath, I could feel my brain kick into gear. I was ready to shrivel into a living prune on my mission to enjoy a delightful bout of planning.

[Tips] Berylinian citizens who emit pungent body odors due to a lack of bathing can be fined for disrupting public morals.

For a munchkin, time spent imagining the ungodly power of a broken character using a near-perfect database of information is time to be celebrated.

At the time of creation, all characters are more or less equal. There are, of course, some exceptions: one can sometimes run a unique subrace to take on debilitating demerits that make it almost impossible to interact with the setting in exchange for unbelievable stats.

However, this sort of localized peak did not suit my ideals. The absolute power afforded by a build backed with completed data sets never risked being turned away at foreign doors; in battle, I refused to be reduced to a mere spectator when the dungeon crawling began. Of course, these sorts of builds were sometimes bailed out by the release of new supplements, but that's beside the point.

The steamy bath warmed both my body and mind, and as I introduced the lubricant of excitement, my thoughts began to race to the point that my inner monologue was chasing its own tail. Still, I didn't mind so long as I was having fun.

Regardless, I lived by a certain min-maxing philosophy: a truly broken character ought to be strong in any and every situation—or at least, as many as possible.

Understand that this isn't to say I didn't appreciate a frontline warrior whose only weakness was being kited by a maneuverable ranged enemy, and I would never disparage the mages who could dish out immense burst damage and fizzled out immediately after. Even noncombatant characters who shone in the explorative and deductive parts of a campaign could be considered strong in their own right, despite being reduced to reactive rolls in combat.

Furthermore, tabletop games were meant to be a team endeavor. I loved seeing a whole party synergize into a singular entity to dish out stupidly high damage numbers with a combo. To that effect, I'd played the role of a supportive unit that could only contribute to a battle by buffing my allies more times than I could count.

Yet my favorite kind of strength was the kind without flaws—the kind where

we could say, “Just throw *him* in and it’ll probably sort itself out.” Obviously, this style of play required me to choose my tables carefully, but I saw no reason to hold myself back in this world.

With all that said, my major physical stats had changed little from the time I’d left the canton. Dexterity and Endurance were the highest at Scale VII, only two tiers away from the top. Following them, Stamina, Agility, and Memory were at VI: Superb. The remaining Strength, Immunity, Intelligence, Mana Capacity, and Mana Output all hovered at V: Good, for an excellent basis to work off of.

When you considered that even my lowest physical attributes all trumped the average mensch in every way, my spread was impressive. This satisfying setup was five straight years of diligent effort—sans my propensity for poorly planned purchases—given numerical form.

What lay ahead in this respect hardly needed any consideration. I’d long hoped to attain IX: Divine Favor in one or two of these stats, and I had a chance to achieve that with my Dexterity. Combined with Enchanting Artistry, I could refine my fixed damage build to cut down anything in my path.

On the other hand, I could invest in my main attacking skill by bringing Hybrid Sword Arts to IX: Divine to solidify my strength specifically in combat. Weaponry represented my main mode of damage, and heightening my precision and power would translate to more reliable hits—a persuasive proposition, seeing as I professed faith in the almighty fixed value. Perhaps this was a tad arrogant of me, but I could only wonder if the “Divine” title meant mastery would let me point my blade toward the heavens.

The second choice I mentioned earlier was to shore up my weaknesses. That begged the question, what *were* my weaknesses? I believed the answer lay in how squishy I was.

Despite my commitment to Endurance, I couldn’t overcome my mensch frame: no amount of leveling could give me the tenacity of a dragon. An overwhelming mass swung with force could reduce me to a red stain, and even the hooves of a horse were enough to trample me. It was harder to find an attack that *wouldn’t* hurt a mensch like myself. The fragility necessary to burn skin from just being in the sunlight was a cut above the other races.

Some might say that comparing mensch to beings with alloyed bones, metallic skin, boiling blood, or magic-deflecting scales was a fool's errand. While not an unfair criticism, the fact that I could kick the bucket from a single hit was terrifying. Nobody enjoyed being one mistake away from death at all times.

I could realistically blow all my savings to mix and match a number of defensive traits to become an impenetrable fortress that rivaled the sturdier races. However, my frequent solo missions meant that too little firepower carried the legitimate risk that I couldn't take down an enemy.

In an extreme case, someone who truly wanted me dead could hit me with something physically unavoidable. A few attacks without opportunity for a saving throw, and I was sure to be down for the count. I might even croak after one blow, depending on where it hit me.

There were probably dozens of ways this could happen to me—in fact, having seen someone like Lady Agrippina, I *knew* there were. Frankly, someone of her level would be overkill in my current state; a band of trained warriors would suffice to do me in. Facing off with a line of spears at the ready and winning was a herculean task. I would need to have an extending blade, be able to cut the very space we inhabited, or otherwise attack in every direction at once.

So what was the answer to overwhelming violence by numbers?

I could forgo evasion in favor of raw defense. With high-enough damage resistance I could soak the better part of each hit, but no amount of skill would let me overcome the inherent weakness of my physical form—I clearly wasn't surviving a meteor strike, for example—so the most realistic way to pursue this idea would be with spells.

Magic had all sorts of variations on this idea. My physical makeshift shield of Unseen Hands was one example, but one could even erect force fields that overwrote physical phenomena, or barriers that were the very *notion* of protection given form (though at present I was far from being able to comprehend how these worked).

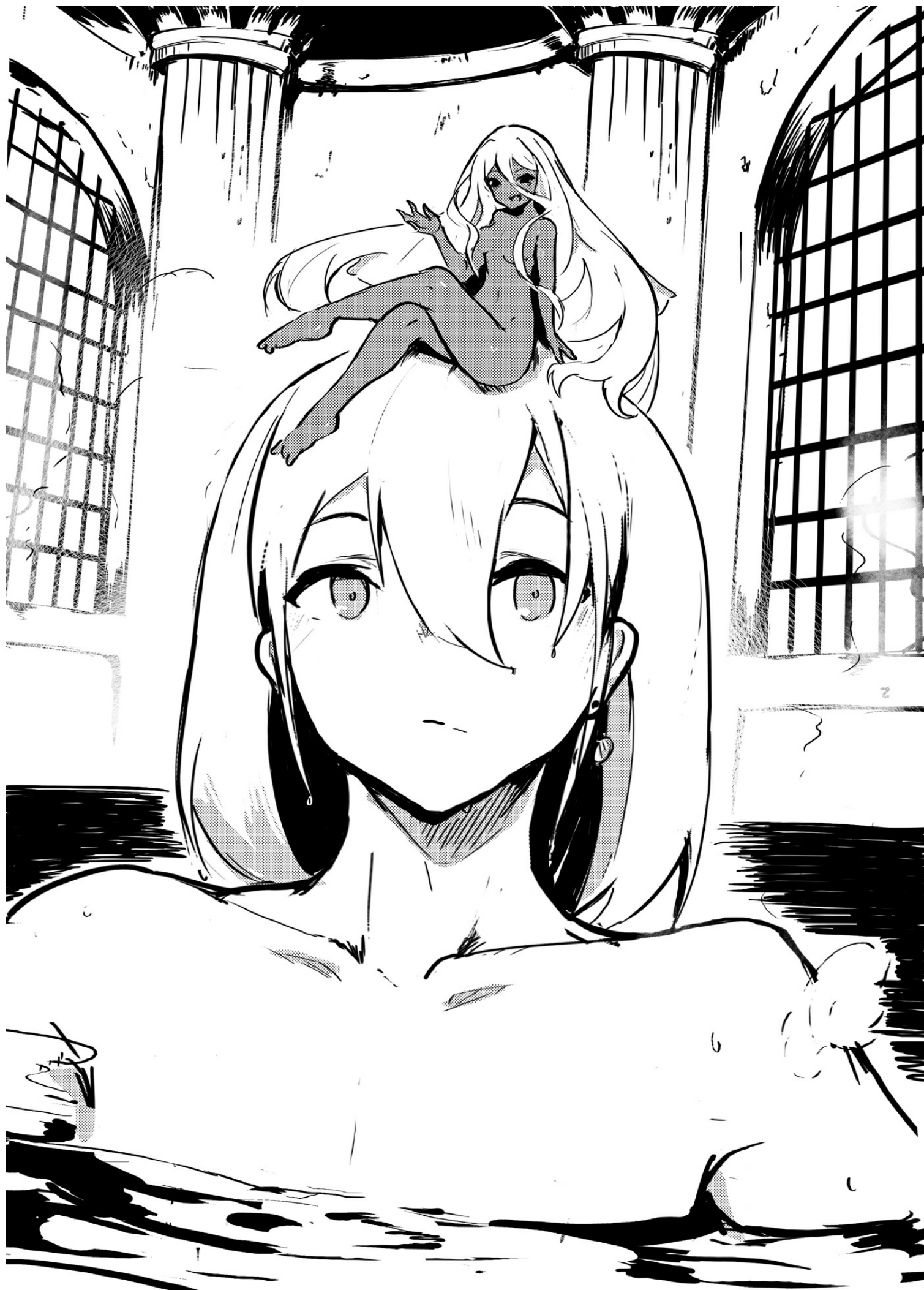
I suspected that Lady Leizniz would be happy to teach me if I asked, and Lady Agrippina usually offered helpful advice in this field. Dipping my toes into defensive magic was certainly an attainable goal.

However, there existed another possible solution: kill everyone with AoE before they could kill me. This didn't fundamentally solve anything, as sneak attacks would still spell doom, but this was easy to wrap my mind around as an arcane power move... The problem was that my Mana Output couldn't keep up.

Helga's gemstone had bolstered my lunar ring to performance on par with a mediocre staff, but that wasn't nearly enough to line up with a true mystic powerhouse. If I ignored the karmic and legal consequences of my actions, I could develop a mutation spell to fill a battlefield with toxic gas for an easy wipe, but unfortunately this sort of war crime was prone to friendly fire, so I shelved the idea. Dragging in innocent bystanders was more than a little iffy, and I wasn't so immoral as to claim that it was every man for himself.

"And that is where we come in, o Beloved One."

"...This is the *men's* bath, you know."



Amidst my contemplation of ethics and efficiency, I felt a gentle presence float onto my forehead. I didn't even bother glancing up to confirm that Ursula had come to meddle in my business again.

What kind of slob parks their fat ass on someone else's head?

"Is that of any concern to an alf?" Ursula asked. "I'm sure you can see the little alfar hovering about to enjoy the warm air, and the water spirits here in the bath, can't you?"

I couldn't refute her casual comment; it was completely true. Alfar playing meaningless pranks—like turning a bucket of hot water cold, which I might add is not something they ought to be doing to the elderly—were a common sight here. Despite understanding that it was fey nature to do as they pleased where they pleased, I couldn't help but wish they'd be a smidge more considerate of those around them.

"I stopped by to share a tidbit of advice, seeing as you seem so muddled," Ursula went on. "Share a dance with me, and I shall grant you a wondrous spell. I have an oh-so-terrific alfish charm that can prevent any and all physical interference from outsiders."

Physical immunity was a trait that transcended the realm of tabletops to tickle the hearts of gamers as a whole. While it was often surprisingly counterable, the ability was one of the highest heights of defensive play. However, I knew that even the simplest of fairy favors were laced with their fatal love of trickery.

I was sure her offer was something like "I'll turn you into an alf!" and I'd be whisked away to the twilight hill as payment.

"I'm not too keen on waking up only to realize a century passed me by," I said.

"A shame. It isn't any fun if you already know the punchline." I was even less keen on the svartalf's reaction.

Give me a break... Slipping into another era had its own allure, but I wasn't so power hungry that I'd abandon my family and friends just to grow stronger.

"Don't you have anything milder?" I asked her with the faintest of whispers

using Voice Transfer.

“I’ll get in trouble if I give you something for nothing in return.” Perhaps even these eternal fey dancers had their share of bureaucratic troubles. “Let me think... Well, I suppose you don’t *have* to come to the hill with me. If you’re willing to do me a little favor, I shall teach you a wonderful way of strolling around that all of us svartalgar enjoy.”

This piqued my interest. I figured Ursula was referring to her peculiar footwork that prevented me from truly registering her movement. While I hadn’t a clue as to how it worked, it felt perfectly natural that a fairy presiding over the ambiguous hours of the dark night could move that way, and in my hands it would be a stellar defensive tool. You may remember that I’d once chided mid-combat stealth as ineffective, but it was perfectly passable as a temporary means of dodging a hit.

So long as an enemy’s attack didn’t encompass the whole field, it needed to be aimed at a person or place. Even homing magic that covered a large area wouldn’t land if its caster didn’t recognize the target as being present. The spell wouldn’t bother to follow a “nonexistent” enemy.

Thus, utilizing mid-combat stealth as an unorthodox evasive maneuver was far from weak. That said, it *also* forced one’s allies to become the target of aggression, so not being weak was as far as it went. Most of the time, other party members would complain that the resources needed for such stealth would be better allocated to damage. An assassin’s first job was to deal a massive burst of damage, after all...

Of course, I wasn’t an assassin, so Ursula’s invitation was worth considering.

“So,” I asked, “what would I need to do?”

“Well,” she said, “I’d like the head of an obnoxious magus who keeps meddling with my sistren.”

Everything that came out of the mouth of this tiny figurine of dusk was horrific. My dear childhood friend had been rather extreme herself, but at least Margit had the modesty to be roundabout with her speech. Er, the oxymoron of modest extremism notwithstanding.

“I’d prefer it if you refrained from making bloodcurdling requests while the sun is still high,” I said.

“Huh? The sun?” Ursula gingerly floated off and hovered just above my floating head. As always, her privates were covered only by locks of hair—though only from certain angles—and she peered at me like she was observing a strange creature. “The sun has set long ago.”

“What?!”

I leapt to my feet and realized the once-empty bathhouse was slowly filling up with customers. The men squinting at me for suddenly shouting were not old men or young boys with time to spare; they were laborers who’d come to wash up after a long day of work.

Crap! I got so lost in thought that I didn’t even realize I was pruning up, let alone that it’s already night!

“Oh shoot!”

“Come now,” Ursula said, “at least cover yourself.”

I’d come to bathe explicitly for my nightly duties, but my bath was now the reason I was going to be late to my job. The irony was not lost on me, and I wouldn’t have anything to say in my defense if Lady Agrippina pointed it out!

Cutting off the challenging yet enjoyable question of how I would further refine the essence of my character, I bolted for the changing room.

[Tips] Some mensch are endowed with miraculous physique and particular traits that allow them to surpass the usual defensive limitations of their kind.

“Magic is magical precisely because it refuses to expose its root until the bitter end.”

Agrippina loathed the reclusive hermits of First Light, but these words had come from the sole practitioner that she respected from their flock. Now more than ever, she knew this axiom to be true.

A multitude of items whizzed about her: plates, candles, miscellaneous goods,

and her beloved books. Though their trajectories seemed chaotic at first glance, each and every arc of travel painted a picture that proved there was method to this madness.

The cup of tea Agrippina had finished just moments ago zoomed toward the main door to her lab, only to take a sharp turn to the side and disappear into the kitchen. Earlier in the day, her apprentice had knocked the books off of her shelves in an arcane tantrum after misinterpreting a historical story; these tomes, too, whirled back to their proper places with equal parts speed and care.

An outsider would guess a geist was toying with the methuselah's belongings, but the truth was far simpler.

"I'll need to teach that boy the meaning of confidentiality," Agrippina sighed to herself. "So artless, in spite of his brain..."

The magus was in the same spot she always was; if she could grow roots, they would have curled around her hammock as she puffed out a cloud of smoke. Her servant Erich had rushed to her side in a panic at his gross tardiness and was now tidying her workshop to the absolute best of his ability.

Agrippina knew where the boy's bounds lay. She'd seen him do plenty on their journey from the boonies to the capital, starting with their encountering a broken elf on what she had meant to be a short daemon hunt (as an aside, she remained modestly bitter about his refusal to sell her the gemstone). Once, she'd been ready to show off her power when a band of thugs had seriously soured her mood, and Erich's quick work in dispatching them had earned him a small modicum of her respect.

However, his movements now were incomparably refined compared to what he'd shown up to this point. The methuselah eyes Agrippina had trained throughout her life showed her all that she needed to see: the boy's Hands were more numerous and more precise than before. Just where on earth did he find the mental processing power to control each one?

The magus had long since known him to be an impressive child, but this was simply abnormal. An average mensch could not handle feats so *methuselah* in nature. While these lowly humanfolk were prone to producing geniuses that far exceeded the natural talents of their peers, the prodigies capable of truly

impressing Agrippina and her kind were few and far between.

There was little wonder why: the difference between the two races' capacity to multitask was simply too great. All sentient life came with the gift of juggling several concurrent undertakings. Talking while walking or letting one's mind drift during a repetitive chore were common sights.

However, the hurdle of parallel spellcasting could not be overcome with cheap muscle memory. To do so literally required more than one strand of consciousness—a tall task for the brains of mensch.

There were many tales of great mensch who'd overcome their physical limitations to handle simultaneous spells. However, Erich was dedicating each iteration of his magic to a separate task as he hammered away at his own business. Agrippina thought this to be worthy of great praise; his actions were almost like that of a methuselah.

Alas, she had to deduct points for the boy's willingness to show his hand, even if only to his master and sister. After all, mages and magia were at their best when they settled things at first sight.

Spells and cantrips were difficult to counter in combat. To face a mage without knowledge of their capabilities was a death sentence. Trained warriors being reduced to lifeless corpses by novice spellcasters whose eyes had just opened was not too uncommon a sight.

That wasn't to say that magic *couldn't* be countered. Just as good and evil were never absolute among mortals, no magus could ever claim to be flawless.

Take an extraordinary wizard who had grazed the deepest secrets of the craft. Say this mage had attained mastery over the very concept of "flame," and could burn anything, even if it was physically impossible to do so.

A competent polemurge attempting to kill such a mage would first attempt to solve the issue on a greater strategic scale. "How do we even kill this guy?" they'd ask themselves. "Maybe a sneak attack?"

However, once information on the enemy mage's general style of combat and hidden tricks were unveiled, they would move on to direct countermeasures. If it turned out to be a bluff, cantrips could be put out by dispelling oxygen from

the air, and true magic could be erased with a spell of antithetical nature. Even if the target genuinely had mastery over the secrets of fire, a finely tuned barrier could reasonably disarm any threat.

In each of these cases, a handful of average magia weaving their spells in tandem had a real chance at besting the prodigal flame user. What remained was a muddy contest of attrition to see whose body would give out first, and at that point, individual skill was a bygone issue.

In short, a magus whose tricks were public knowledge was weak relative to the rest of the field. On the other end of the spectrum, those who kept their secrets well guarded struck fear in enemy hearts by presence alone; the terror caused by the threat of instant death for a single mistake was difficult to put to words.

Thus, Agrippina refused to show her hand in battle. She elected to keep her specialized knowledge to herself, going so far as to muddy the language of her treatises with untruths to throw the reader off her trail.

She was far from the only magus to do so. Their flock were cautious: each and every one stashed away a crafty trick that could kill a man before he knew his own cause of death. The road of research was long, and the most vital ingredient to protect was always one's own self.

Not a single researcher or professor at the College dared to reveal themselves in any actual sense. In fact, Agrippina could even be considered pure of heart among them. Most magia would sooner see their parents buried than expose their hidden abilities, and the sight of her servant frantically running about doing just that was comically absurd to the seasoned magus. She would have lazily told him to try not to be late again had he not immediately pulled out all the stops.

Erich's Hands weren't bad. They were more than enough to kill at first sight. With a little more tweaking, he'd be able to intimidate with a brief glimpse of his powers and back it up with incomprehensible violence in a pinch. Wasting his fundamental talents by laying everything bare was such a shame.

Of course, Agrippina could expect nothing more, considering that the boy hadn't received a magus's education. For better or for worse, he was ultimately

just a child with a penchant for spellcasting.

Now then, what kind of ace shall I put up his sleeve? It had been quite some time since Agrippina had pondered a question so amusing. She had a hunch that bordered on premonition that if she taught the boy to fight like a magus, he would transform into something *untouchable*.

[Tips] To read a magus's essay and fully grasp its meaning is an endeavor that often takes the better part of a lifetime. Penned to conceal intent, these convoluted documents substitute explicit falsehoods with esoteric turns of phrase. Some consider the magia art of sesquipedalian obfuscation an exercise in vanity.

The College's great library lay deep below the surface, carved into the bedrock. Its imposing majesty was almost too much to marvel at, and my first emotion upon seeing the baffling scale of its halls was a godly reverence.

How they built a structure of this size underground was beyond me. I felt undiluted awe as I looked up at the bookshelves, each towering like a mountain. The collective sierra of shelves was delightfully colored with papers, wood, and metal. Staring for too long would certainly corrupt my sense of scale.

Tomes as large as mensch sat stored in house-sized racks and tiny books smaller than my palm kept in miniature shelves lay haphazardly strewn about, further weakening my grasp on what my eyes were telling me. I'd heard urban legends about lost readers turning up withered and mummified, and it terrified me to realize I might have joined their ranks without an experienced librarian to guide me.

Each section of the mountain range was covered in a blue tapestry to protect the books within from the open air, and the gentle sway of their sheets evoked an image of the sleeping giant of knowledge, twitching and turning in its sheets.

The library was sure to enchant anyone who appreciated the written word or fantastical dreamscapes. In my case...I probably would have been more moved had I not been dressed like a total moron.

Two days had passed since I'd run late to work for the worst reason I could

possibly imagine, and I'd arrived at the College library as requested. Today's outfit was a deep blue pourpoint embellished with extravagant embroidery in blinding gold. Below the belt I wore a style of shorts that had been popular in noble spheres some time ago; the rest of my legs were covered with snow-white silk tights. My shoes were knee-high deerskin boots. The finishing touch was a wide-brimmed hat complete with a fowl plume that made me want to ask what kind of deranged costume parade I was dressing for.

I'd spent more time than I cared to admit despairing at my reflection in the mirror.

How could this woman bring herself to so thoroughly trample my dignity? The *least* she could do was order a smaller headpiece and take off the infuriating feather that adorned it. What was more, I would have appreciated it if the pointless stuffing used to fluff up my shoulders were to be removed. Not only was it hard to move, but the hat made me look like the titular princess knight a certain god of manga had created.

The capital's nickname was less for show than the city itself, and the northern districts were crawling with highborn women on the forefront of fashion. These ladies and the gentlemen that escorted them had an eye for style...and yet they'd all stopped to stare. *Did I do something to deserve this kind of abuse?*

I wasn't opposed to standing out, but not like this. If I was destined to attract attention, I wanted it to be for something I could be proud of. I was on the verge of tears... The other day I'd considered my squishy body to be my greatest fault, but perhaps my mental weakness was just as problematic.

I'd hurried to lose the gawkers by fleeing to the College, but my torture continued here. It was only after I'd reached the middle layer of the book vault (which students could only access with the permission of a professor) that I finally escaped my misery. Knowing that I was probably going to be the subject of gossip, I resolved myself to steer clear of this area for the near future.

"My, you're very cute." Such was the librarian's evaluation of me—*wait*. I recognized the lady manning the front desk as a receptionist for the main Krahenschanze hall. I did not have the mental fortitude to keep my cool after receiving a compliment like this from someone I would have to see again in the

future.

“Wh-Where may I find the second reading room?” I croaked, pulling down my hat to hide my beet red face. The librarian got up and began leading me with a smile.

Just kill me.

“Ahh! Wonderful! This is fantastic! You’re just so—ah, both sides are incredible! I love both parts! Keeping your waist and collar hidden to snuff out your masculine features, only to reveal your boyish legs with shorts was such a brilliant idea! The ambiguity is so perfect!”

In contrast, Lady Leizniz’s initial response triggered a different response: *Shut up and prepare to die.*

This thought was probably something that my TRPG-addled mind involuntarily churned out because part of my psyche had classified her as an enemy. My tabletop instincts whispered in my ear that I was to kill her—now or later, whenever the opportunity might arise—in an attempt to hoist up my shriveled spirit.

The pervert before me was definitely classed as an undead enemy; I refused to consider her a connection. Regardless, she floated around me for a while, having the utter gall to ask me to strike a pose.

And you know what? I did. With my best smile, to boot.

While still not a *small* price to pay for mystic knowledge, the expense was worth it. Munchkins are beasts that will trade in self-respect for raw strength every day of the week. *Go on, take my honor. Pride is cheap—especially mine.*

I wasn’t kidding: tabletop players were detestable human beings that never hesitated to stray off the moral path when the going got tough. At their best, they poisoned foods, took hostages, and begged for forgiveness only to get in a sneak attack once the enemy turned away. At worst, they lit whole buildings ablaze, drowned encampments by diverting water from nearby tributaries, and tossed infected corpses into enemy territory to bring down their foes with plague.

Thinking that the sort of lowlifes who’d stoop to tactics like these after a few

minutes of discussion for a handful of extra experience points had *pride* was folly. Currying favor with a bicentenarian degenerate was a piece of cake with the right smile.



After concluding an episode that I would bury deeper in my heart than my flamboyant poetry session, I finally had a chance to win what I'd been seeking: *knowledge*. To that end, I made great use of my company, who'd unbelievably managed to defend her position as dean for two hundred years.

"Combat magic?" Lady Leizniz asked quizzically.

"Yes, ma'am. I hope to become an adventurer one day."

"Huh? I think you'd be better off aiming to become an attendant or steward. Erich, you're a very impressive young mage, and you have a grasp of social etiquette as well. Above all else, that pointy-eared creature is more than fit to secure a place for you in society, as thoughtless as she may be."

Lady Leizniz's surprisingly respectable response reminded me that she was a professional teacher. If she was going to go around acting like a deviant with more loose screws than not, I wished she'd keep her character consistent.

I explained that adventuring was a longtime dream of mine, and she gave up with a small sigh (ignore the fact that wraiths didn't breathe) as she produced a handful of textbooks.

"In that case," she said, "I think it may be better to teach you a magus's notion of battle rather than mere battle magics."

A shiver ran down my spine—not the sweet kind Margit's whispers offered, but a flavor of fear that I'd experienced on the night I first met Ursula. It was the terror I'd tasted when I first crossed swords with daemons. And how could I forget this sensation when I'd sampled the same dread as razored hailstones chipped my ogre shield to bits? This was the fright that came in the face of something at once in plain view and yet utterly ineffable.

"Well," she went on, "this is less of a personal doctrine and more one shared by the magia in the School of Daybreak, particularly the polemurges of our faction."

Lady Leizniz placed a worn book that had clearly gone through countless repairs in front of her. Her expression stiffened and she straightened her posture; that alone was enough to dispel the image of a vitality-glorifying wraith and solidify her presence as an esteemed professor.

Maybe the eccentricity of all these powerful people is some kind of twisted joke meant to spite me...

“Erich,” she asked, “what would you need to do to have a living thing die?”

The question was simplicity itself. When stripped of all details, the pursuit of combat magic came back to this idea...and I knew the answer.

“They’ll die if I kill them,” I said. To some, this may sound like a tautology. However, I was confident that this was the ideal answer for a Daybreak thinker.

“That’s right. Living beings will die if you kill them. What’s more, there are even ways to kill undead entities like me.”

Lady Leizniz nodded with a soft smile. Her fair, slender finger glided across her neck.

“And anything that can be killed has a weakness. For humanfolk, that entails the neck and brain. Demonfolk and daemons add mana stones to the same list. And those who inhabit a reality unbound by physical flesh like myself are still bound to some crucial existential core...and you can say the same of magic. Should you learn how to gouge that nucleus out, a simple tablespoon would be more than enough to end any affair.”

Lady—no, Professor Leizniz flashed a bewitching smile.

“Now then, this is a shade morally gray, but we’re all alone here. Shall we begin our little lecture, future adventurer?”

The professor raised a single finger and merrily readied herself for a lesson. In that moment, I finally realized the nature of the emotions I’d felt for the School of Daybreak ever since I had first heard their general philosophy.

“Allow me to show you the difference between fighting with magic and fighting as a magus. Feast your eyes on the secrets of a Daybreak polemurge!”

The School of Daybreak sought to bring bounty unto the world; they wanted to bathe society in the radiant light of progress. They had dogmatic faith in efficiency on their quest to achieve peak performance—they, too, were min-maxers.

[Tips] The great library of the College is divided into three layers. The top layer is safe for students and lay bureaucrats to enter freely; the middle layer is dangerous for all but the studied and those accompanied by mentors; and the deepest reaches are home to forbidden tomes that can, at worst, kill visitors upon entry. Five hundred years of steady collection has caused Rhine's slumbering giant of knowledge to grow enormously. According to the master librarian, the books kept within could reduce the Empire to rubble not dozens, but grosses of times.

Psychosorcery, otherwise known as sympathetic magic, was one of the few branches of magecraft that the innovation-loving rulers of the Empire forbade. Its study intruded on the sacrosanct temple of the mind, mangling the memories that formed the building blocks of self. Not even the free thinkers of Rhine could tread such grounds lightly.

That said, the imperial understanding of the word “forbidden” carried a nuanced clause: the spells were off-limits to the uneducated masses, but figures of sufficient authority permitted their use when they saw no other option. Rhinians were not the type to hold the mere mention of these terrifying secrets as taboo.

Put simply, the abominable magic was banned from general use. To wholly ignore it out of fear was unthinkable—what would we do when a threat equally as sinister knocked on our door? Furthermore, people were forgetful beings, sure to lose sight of the reasons why any given thing had been prohibited to begin with. The succession of knowledge was the only precaution against thoughtless fools who reached out for unmentionable means of attaining power.

It then followed that knowledge ought not to gather dust; imperial opinion suggested that the nation make use of its advancements in the name of all that was just. The nation's ideal of enacting good whenever possible highlighted both the magnanimity and impudence of its people.

Naturally, psychosorcerous tomes were extremely limited in number. All I knew about the field were the basics: it brushed up against the core of what defined life, and was said to be the most intricate and delicate branch of

magic... I wouldn't have guessed I'd get a chance to experience its profound secrets just by *cosplaying*.

My vision was not my own—I was likely being shown another person's memories. Whoever I'd borrowed these eyes from, they were facing a truly desperate situation.

I overlooked a dreary field from atop a massive boulder. My foothold stood alone in the vast plains, as if someone had dropped it in from a faraway land. The open range was buried under a giant wave of black dots.

Each figure was a jenkins. Where stuarts were demihumans with ratlike features, these were demonfolk that took on similar form. Smaller than even goblins and frailer than even mensch, jenkins amounted to little more than bipedal rats, widely thought to be deficient beings whose high fertility rates were their only saving grace. In a discussion of the weakest amongst the sentient races, their individual metrics put them in contention for the throne.

Jenkins did not have their own nation-state, failed to establish proper tribes despite social activity, and had yet to produce a single aristocrat in the broad-minded Trialist Empire. They were thought of as totally insignificant all throughout the Central Continent.

However, the same could not be said of a mob of this size. *Ah*, I thought to myself, *so this is a stampede*.

I'd once heard that a select few demonfolk with outstanding reproductive capabilities retained their urge to mate post-daemonization. Surrendering themselves to base carnal desires, they multiplied quickly, and their offspring were obviously equally as touched with madness. To make matters worse, they invariably inherited the daemononic trait that allowed them to forgo the need for sustenance.

Every now and again, these creatures found opportunities to breed undisturbed. Oftentimes they simply originated in an enclosed area where all they could do was add to their own numbers. Inevitably, the lid on their nest would burst or otherwise be opened from the outside in a streak of good—or arguably bad—fortune. Claustrophobia from overcrowding and the feral desires sealed away in the depths of their souls then compelled them to march out in

search of two things: more bountiful land to breed in and an end to their insatiable hunger.

The pack burying the land was comprised of so many rats that it would be futile to attempt a count. In the skies above the other end of the plain, I could see something flying toward me. I wondered what it was. It soared high, leaving a trail of steam behind it. For a moment I imagined it was a fighter jet, but no fantasy setting can have airplanes without showing at least a bit of steampunk flair. Yet the silhouette was undeniably sailing through the sky.

Something broke away from the distant airborne dot. It was one size smaller than the main unit, which continued to sputter out its smoky trail. The small package fell freely at incredulous speeds, and the definition of its outline became more and more pronounced as it drew closer: it was the unmistakable shape of a *person*.

“AAHHH!”

The man’s scream lingered in my ears as he flailed his limbs about in a desperate attempt to form some kind of spell. He gently decelerated, landing directly in the ocean of jenkins waiting for him below.

By all accounts, this ought to have been the end. He would be swarmed by an army of rats, and the GM would wish him better luck next time as he handed him a new character sheet, which he’d fill out in between bitter grumbles.

“Is that bitch insane?! Don’t screw with me!”

Yet, for whatever reason, the man was alive in spite of all the horrific gore he generated on impact. He screamed at the dot disappearing beyond the sky with animated vigor before peeling off the giblets clinging to his expensive armor—or so I thought.

The man swung his arm down with great force, and a longsword appeared in his empty hand. Simple as the blade was, the abundance of mana contained within froze everything around him as he swung, causing the air to let out an icy crackle of agony.

“Just you wait! I’ll make you pay when I get back!” The man gave one last booming shout before diving into the sea of daemons.

His fighting was spectacular. He slashed, dodged, and parried, repeating this cycle ad nauseum to swiftly chip away at the mass of enemies. When faced with a line of spears pointed his way—judging from the lunacy these daemons exhibited, their coordination was a stroke of pure luck—or a dangerous individual that had some control of magic, the man employed the cheapest of spells to clean them up.

The first spell was a flash of light. He merely snapped his fingers to produce a ray of light from the ring on his left hand. Shining it in the spearmen's eyes gave him just enough leeway to slice right past them.

The second spell was an unembellished barrier. All it did was deflect any spell cast with less mana than itself; yet this standard barrier bought enough time for the man to close in on any jenkins mage. A shallow cut of the throat was enough for him to prevail.

The third spell was a defensive measure when all other options were exhausted: he shouted, creating a wide-arc shock wave that disrupted his enemies' formation, buying him time to reposition.

His actions were more than simple—they were downright elementary. He swung his sword, cast his spells, and killed his enemies. Foe after foe fell to earth from his perfected fundamentals.

The man was polished. He'd fine-tuned himself and the spells he used to an optimal state for battle. In the end, mortal beings could only activate so many spells at once. Knowing a hundred spells was wonderful, studying a thousand exemplary, and discovering the depths of a million was cause for praise; yet a mind could only truly bring about one at a time.

I saw now: to efficiently employ the most apt spell in any given moment without any excess on the path to murder was the underpinning of all magic combat.

How long had this gone on? The bodies of those the man had butchered were packed under his feet like a layer of flooring, and the gaps in the sea of entrails were invariably pooled with blood. The lone magus who'd crafted this grisly scene reinvigorated his exhausted body with a spell and pushed himself to his feet.

On the other hand, the daemonic horde remained numerous, as if to say total slaughter was an impossibility. Deranged as any other ichor-drunk horror, seeing their fallen allies did nothing to dissuade them.

“There are a whole damn lot of you, I’ll give you that. You just keep coming...”

Splashback alone painted the magus with enough blood to make him look like a man on his last legs. He spat out a mouthful with disgust and shouldered his sword. The blade glowed a faint white and began trembling with a high-pitched whir. I was sure that he was preparing to take out the rabble in one fell swoop.

But then three lines of smoke appeared on the horizon, accompanied by the ear-piercing sound of whistling arrows to announce the arrival of an army. The projectiles had been enchanted to leave behind a red trail in their wake, drawing three orderly lines toward the heavens.

The small platoon trotting onto the field was hopelessly outnumbered. Despite their numerical disadvantage, each soldier boasted ornate armor and a marvelous steed; these men were no doubt ordained knights and their retainers. I could tell at a glance that their impenetrable equipment reflected their pride as warriors.

“Why? What do you think I left you behind for, you fools? There isn’t any reason for you to put yourselves in danger...”

The magus’s features twisted into a sardonic frown. I only now realized that the man was quite the handsome figure. Even as a man myself, I couldn’t deny his beauty. He was somewhere in the ballpark of fifteen or sixteen, and although his face retained a hint of boyishness, the resolute glimmer in his eyes belonged, by my estimation, to an older man. I couldn’t get a read on him: he looked at once like an innocent child and a disciplined adult.

The magus groped at his waist and produced a folded cloth from his pocket. Picking up a nearby spear, he tied the corners to one end and opened up the fabric.

“Huh?”

Having been so thoroughly bathed in blood, the contents of the man’s pockets were similarly drenched. Although there was evidence of lavish

embroidery dotting the surface, the whole banner had been dyed a deep black, erasing whatever symbol that had once adorned it.

“Whoops, no one can see the flag like this... Ah well, whatever. I’ll just say this is *my* emblem.”

The man had furrowed his brow upon first seeing the cloth, but now chuckled to himself at his ingenious idea. With an amused smile, he hoisted the flag up high.

“I’m always covered in blood anyway. Ordering a new one every time is such a waste—a sheet of pure dark crimson suits me fine.”

Still whirring, the magus’s sword grew brighter until its radiance blotted out my entire vision. Just as the light converged for a final burst...someone grabbed me by the neck, ripping my psyche out of the memory and back into the real world.

[Tips] Stampedes are calamities that occur when the stars align to create the perfect storm of misfortune. These swaths of daemons devour any land they set foot in, swallowing cantons whole. If left unchecked, they can bring down entire nations.

Our “little lecture” was eye opening. In fact, I’d practically been handed an answer to my questions on a silver platter.

The handsome magus had attained the peak of combat in his own way. He’d taken an old adage to its logical extreme: you can’t lose if you never fail a stat check. With a hidden ace up his sleeve to clean up annoying crowds, all that was left for him was to take down the boss—if there was one—in single combat. The man was a living example of a fully built character.

Nothing about him was wasteful. By limiting his active skill investments to the bare minimum, he could crank up all of his passives to ludicrous heights. So long as he avoided those dreaded snake eyes, all that remained was to ask the world, “Dice? What are those?” and truck through everything in his path. Having been abandoned by luck long ago, his variant on strength was right up my alley.

Taking his style into consideration, what I lacked was a defensive barrier and an AoE attack; once I had those in hand, I could consider myself complete, in a sense. In which case, I would simply spend my current stock now to round out this plan and slowly polish my abilities in the coming months.

After our lesson, Lady Leizniz had expressly forbidden me from asking any questions pertaining to the memory and its origins, before moving on to teach me basic spells. The arcane shield that scaled with mana output—I'd need to retune it for better efficiency in the future—and the blinding light the magus had used fit in nicely with my extant style of combat.

All that remained was to perfect my strengths, and...

"Hm? Who's there?"

I suppressed the giddiness in my step—both at my ongoing optimization plans and the warm bed waiting for me in my immediate future—on my way home, when I detected a faint presence. The fluttering butterfly demanding my attention was, as always, folded from pristine white paper.

It hovered in place, not attempting to lead me anywhere. I extended a hand and it unfolded under the moonlight like a night-blooming flower. The paper was typical in every way, save for the handful of arcane equations written on it. I recognized the handwriting behind the concise formulas as that of my liege's.

I wondered what triggered the sudden letter. Skirting to the side of the road to stand under a magic streetlight (and to get out of the way of my fellow working men on their way home), I took a moment to look through it carefully.

Fundamental principles, spell assembly, laws of reality that either helped or hindered the spell's function, and effective means of tricking the latter were scattered about on the sheet. All things considered, the note felt chaotic: even with the prerequisite knowledge to understand its contents, I needed to expend serious mental effort to decipher its meaning. While I was certain it listed the formula to some spell or another, the utter disorganization of it all was akin to being given the parts to a plastic model without the corresponding manual. Figuring out what it would do or how it would do it was going to take some time.

Uh... Huh?

Oh, I see, this axiom depends on this other part. So this giant midsection that looks like the main topic is actually a tangential idea, but I have to understand it before moving on to the thesis. On the other hand, trying to get the big picture from just this fundamental bit is a waste of time... Why would you ever write a paper this way?!

Wait a second. Hm? Um, that means, uh, it should be...

Two seconds later, I failed to contain myself and shouted, “What the hell are you sending me?!” drawing the attention of all the passersby. Realizing that I’d caused a scene while still dressed like a buffoon, I quickly fled for home.

[Tips] Some things ought not to be done unless the situation is grave enough to warrant their doing. Reasons such as “I’m sure this will be terribly amusing,” and “I want a cute boy to like me!” do not suffice to justify such actions; anyone incapable of understanding such things cannot be called a mature adult.

Autumn of the Thirteenth Year

Character Sheet

A slip of paper used to keep track of everything from HP and MP to consumable items. Oftentimes, these are used to note any experience awarded by the GM as well, and are effectively a diary of sorts to keep track of one's adventure.

The importance of an experience tracker needs no explanation, but the scribbles in the "Notes" section can serve as a reminder of bygone adventures long after the campaign ends. Accounting for both in-game value and priceless sentimentality, these slips must be stored in safe locations.

Bountiful wheat adorned the land and cool breezes ruffled the golden stalks. It was the busiest season in the Empire, and the Harvest Goddess's golden locks flourished as farmers prepared for reaping.

In rural cantons, agricultural families worked proudly to display the fruits of a year's labor, celebrating the end of gentle summer and the beginning of stormless autumn. The fall months promised great reward for exhausting work; only at this time of year did every drop of sweat taste as sweet as nectar.

Carriages carrying taxed grains and produce went to and fro, and caravans peddled similar wares that they'd stocked in the countryside. Imperial guards patrolled the busy highways at all hours, and the lively sound of marching horses could be heard everywhere one went.

However, the hustle and bustle of autumn also invited the unscrupulous to push their luck in search of a big payday. On an unassuming street off of the main imperial highway leading to the capital, a group of men were poised at the ready. The path cut a valley through two gently sloped hills as the lone bit of level land, and the terrain made the location rife with blind spots.

The men were mercenaries by trade, but many people of the era believed

that even the most heinous of crimes were fair game so long as they weren't caught. Until there was no one left to spread word of their offenses, mercenaries could and did dip into less savory trade.

Every year, some canton or another went to their magistrate in the spring to report that bandits had sucked the town dry of food in order to ride out the previous winter, and tragically, they almost always managed to leave the empty husk of a town before imperial authorities arrived.

The thirty-odd members who made up this group were no different. While the road they set up on was tiny, there were a smattering of smaller cantons and towns that lay ahead. Naturally, they could expect a handful of wagons delivering taxes; moreover, the remote region was the perfect spot for ambitious merchants to peddle copious loads of exotic foods and wines to the partygoers at local harvest festivals.

Furthermore, patrolling guards had no choice but to watch over the most important highways connecting large towns. Developing regions and forgotten roads were rarely visited by trained soldiers, and the mercenaries had managed to cash in three times in this season alone.

Of their work this year, one had been a pack of buggies hauling yearly taxes, and the other two had been small merchant caravans. Their haul was already far more than it took to feed a group less than forty strong, but they still held out for more prey.

The taxable items had been boring: rye and animal feed. The first caravan had contained dried fish from the southern sea, but the men found these unpalatable. To their glee, the last had brought them a good deal of booze; unfortunately, most of it was gutter ale with a sour kick.

Furthermore, they found the lack of women to be disappointing. They'd seen a few in the carriages they'd assaulted, but all of them had been mages who'd fought to the bitter end, unfit to be taken captive.

Bored and sullen, the men caught sight of a pair of travelers. While the small figures were plainly dressed, the horses they rode were antithetically magnificent. One look at the black war horses sweating as they cut through the cool autumn winds was enough for the trained fighters to know their worth.

They were clearly a prize too great to be commanded by a pair of children.

Of course, the horses would angrily huff and puff if asked whether the mercenaries were fit to ride them, but that was besides the point.

Although the stallions alone would have turned a fine profit, a closer inspection revealed that the riders were also quite well put together. Their travel wear was neat and free of stains: they were privileged enough to dedicate thought to their appearance.

One of the bandits spoke up: “Them’s gotta be a noble’s bastard kids.”

War horses spoke on behalf of a country’s military might, making it no easy feat to get one. To ride such beasts wearing clean clothes required considerable wealth. Judging from the absence of a carriage full of guards, the boys had money but little political power.

In other words, they were the perfect mark. The bandits curled their lips into sneers and cackled amongst themselves imagining the fat purses they’d soon be looting.

Driven by wretched greed, the men took their usual positions. A small party was to chase their targets into the valley, and the rest of the men would encircle them on the other side. Their plan had no ingenious twists to it, but the tactic was as strong as it was simple. People had changed little since their inception, and surrounding an enemy was a strategy they would never abandon.

The eight men hiding in the shadow of a large rock waited for the boys to pass and fired at them from behind. Their aim was to graze them without injuring the prized horses—that was all it took. Mortals loathed pain, and the threat of it almost always caused feeble mensch to flee or freeze. Even when caravans were accompanied by trained mercenaries or adventurers, few ever wanted to engage in a fight without good reason; the majority preferred retreat as their first option.

Suspicion of the bandits’ trap did little to help. Carriages had massive turning radii, and even the modest slope of the hill complicated things massively. The thieves had a cord of rope and several wooden stakes that they could use as an impromptu palisade, and their main forces were one flare away from rushing in

from the other side.

What remained was the easy task of sinking their teeth into a helpless mark that had exposed its own rear. In many ways, the mercenaries preferred to be sniffed out. While their current victims were on horses unburdened by luggage, the scouting party was more than enough to catch a mere two people.

It was all too easy. As per usual, the arrows flew just close enough to be threatening, and the men grinned with satisfaction.

That was when things went awry. The arrows stopped in midair, and none of them knew why. Four of the projectiles froze like some otherworldly force had caught them, and the other four bounced off of an invisible screen, soaring off into tomorrow.

The sound of tongues clicking abounded. Every now and again, cautious magicians in caravans would use these obnoxious walls—they neither knew nor cared about the formal term being “barrier”—to block their initial strike. In all likelihood, one of the children was a mage. Still, that scarcely mattered: a miraculous save wouldn’t change the fact that scared children were liable to fall right into their trap.

However, this optimism quickly faded as both steeds veered off the beaten path. One flexed its glorious body to trot right up the hill; the other shakily retreated back the way it came, but the rider had clearly positioned himself to block the men’s sight of his fleeing companion. The rider’s hips floated above his horse as he headed straight for the scouting party.

There came another chorus of clicking tongues. The vice-captain spat on the ground, but commanded his seven squad members to make use of their good fortune: who were they to complain if their prey was coming to them? They just wanted the horse, so all they had to do was knock off the spare baggage riding it.

That is to say, these bandits had no interest in taking hostages. While the potential reward was sizable, ransoms were difficult to earn without expertise in the field. The process was a far cry from the simplicity of selling prisoners of war, and burying the proof of their misdeeds was the smart thing to do.

At the vice-captain’s order, seven arrows rained down on the foolhardy

horseman. They sliced through the air at speeds unstoppable by a mere linen coat. Even with a mystic barrier, an average mage had no hope of blocking seven projectiles coming from all angles.

Yet he was no average mage. A flash of silver spilled forth from his hip, cutting down three arrows with ease. The remaining four had frozen in empty space and immediately turned back toward their origins, sinking into the limbs of those who'd fired them. Half of the advance squad was out of commission without knowing how the boy had done it.

Exactly how many managed to react to these breakneck developments was difficult to say. While everyone else was taken aback by the sputtering blood of their allies, the rider slipped his feet out of the stirrups and leapt off his steed. He then jumped again, *while still airborne*, cutting into the closest bandit he could find.

His fluid strike blurred the line between movement and attack, cleaving through the mercenary's thumb and the bow it held. With another down, there were three left standing.

Two of the men managed to draw their swords in spite of the incomprehensible display before them—a feat worthy of endless praise. Their careers were more than mere puffery, and these professional killers had what it took to put down a novice mage.

Alas, the horseman—who ironically now stood on his own two legs—cared not for their skills. His swordplay was paradoxically complex and natural as he plucked the armaments right out of the bandits' hands. A short yelp filled the air each time a thumb joined the blade it once held on a journey through the calm blue sky.

The vice-captain was the last man standing. The shock of seeing seven of his men felled in an instant had abandoned him; all he felt now was fear. Who on earth had he attacked?

From beneath the boy's hood, the bandit could see a sharp, twinkling blue that sent shivers down his spine. The man's instincts led him back to the ace in his sleeve that had saved his hide in countless battles: the crossbow dangling from his waist, always cranked to fire at a moment's notice.

Its heft spoke to the might stored within, making it all the more reliable in the hand. Crossbows were known in war as knight-slayers for their stopping power, and they could tear through magic walls just as easily as they punched through armor.

Experience and intuition guided the man as he took aim and squeezed the trigger. With a bolt that accelerated far faster than anything fired from a standard bow, dodging a shot from this range was inconceivable. His enemy's mind could register the threat, but their body had no hope of evading a projectile that flew faster than a soaring bird.

Unfortunately for the bandit, the boy defied all logic and pressed forward as if nothing had happened. He smashed the broad side of his sword straight into the man's temple, causing the bandit to white out from the pain.

As his consciousness faded, the vice-captain convinced himself that he'd seen some kind of illusion. After all, his bolt had flown straight into a tear in the *fabric of reality* itself.

[Tips] Imperial law considers taxes lost to thieves to have been paid in full, expressly disallowing nobles from demanding additional payment from the cantons they oversee. As a result, there are additional bounties on bandits during harvest season.

Anxious from waiting without any signal from his other squad, the mercenary captain took his twenty-odd men down the road. Upon arriving at their post, he found nothing but the lingering scent of blood.

Are they dead? he wondered. Yet his fears were incredibly unlikely. Although he'd only assigned eight men to corral their victims, they were some of his best. His right-hand man leading the squad was a seasoned veteran who'd taken the heads of five generals, equally endowed in skill and wit. In what world could two sitting ducks wandering into the countryside best his vice-captain?

Still, the captain's distaste for this truth did little to explain his vanished troops. Just as he began considering the unpalatable possibility that the worst had happened...a hail of arrows rained down on his vanguard.

The arrows drew wide arcs on their path down, though most bounced off of helmets and armor plates. Unlike those that appeared in the picture scrolls that told the tales of ancient heroes, real defensive equipment was capable of deflecting projectiles even when assisted by gravity. Otherwise, no one would bother donning such bulky clothing; if one was to be stabbed either way, then everyone would choose the lighter option.

A few cries of pain came from the unfortunate souls who'd been hit between plates or in spots only protected by leather padding. Despite taking a few casualties, the captain was quick to order a defensive formation. Clumping together and raising their shields in the direction of the arrows was sure to curb their losses.

Pondering what had happened was all well and good, but the first order of business was to put all their training to use. The mystery of how their surprise attack had been flipped on its head was compelling, but the men would need to be alive to solve it.

To that end, the captain was the epitome of calm. Over the course of his long history as a sellsword, he'd seen plenty of volatile skirmishes where the element of surprise was traded between two parties. Thus, his first thought was that the tantalizing prey that had wandered by had actually been bait.

Apparently, the group had enjoyed too much success. He'd once heard that the guard employed weak decoys to draw out bandits who avoided the main patrol paths. Imperial patrolmen were stupidly honest, but they were wily when it came to tactics like these. In fact, they were probably even better than regular soldiers when it came to sniffing out crime—perhaps obviously, as they spent every waking moment thinking about hunting bandits—and being on the receiving end of their efforts was hardly enjoyable.

That means... The captain ordered his men to prepare for a pincer attack, and his remaining subordinates readied another defensive line behind him. He knew his fair share of wartime strategy, and an attack on a pinned enemy was a matter of course.

Preemptive defenses would stem the bleeding. The fight ahead would surely be a struggle, but all they could hope for was to bide their time for a chance to

break away from the enemy encirclement.

However, the mercenary's expectations fell flat on their face. The attacker coming to cut them off was not a guard—it was the same mouthwatering mark they'd set out to catch.

Yet the sight that followed was utterly alien. Images came in through the man's eyes, but his brain refused to believe them.

A lone boy was sprinting right toward them with a sword slung over his shoulder and *six others* floating beside him. The solitary figure closed the distance between them with great haste, and the hovering blades without a wielder to their name were strangely intimidating, as if each and every one was backed by a phantom warrior.

Forged in bloodstained battlefields, the mercenaries could tell that the dancing blades were more than a show of strength: each was capable of cutting them down. However, the men were already prepared to ward off an attack and raised their arms in spite of the mystifying spectacle.

As menacing as their attacker seemed, a floating sword was still a sword. Thought of as seven swordsmen, the boy was no match for their spears and shields. The phalanx was a tried and true formation that had survived millennia of use.

However, a few paces before entering striking distance, the lonesome figure extended his spare hand. The men chuckled, thinking this to be a fruitless attempt to shield his unprotected body.

They were wrong. In the next moment, the world flashed brighter than any bolt of lightning, and a thunderous sound tore apart their minds—the world shattered.

[Tips] Magic may cite the laws of reality, but it inherently aims to break them. Thus, it is possible to assign some physical properties absolute directionality that would otherwise be infeasible. Examples include one-way heat, vibrations, and even light.

The mercenaries could not comprehend what had happened. Deafening roars were common in battle: too often they'd heard sounds that split ears, violated the mind, and scratched at the roots of consciousness itself.

Mages would cast spells that exploded with piercing booms, and as of late even laymen could produce similar effects through the use of newfangled "cannons" used to bust open castle walls.

None of it could compare. This was not the low rumble of battle, but a shrill shriek that slashed at the brain. It robbed them of their vision and jostled the world itself. Everything around them swayed violently, until the ground leapt up to sock them in their faces.

Wait, hold on. Maybe I just fell? The disoriented captain attempted to turn his neck to see what the weight on his back was, but failed to accomplish even this. Regardless, with his eyes out of working order, he would have gained nothing for succeeding.

The blindness was orders of magnitude worse than stepping into broad daylight from a dark room, and no amount of blinking could rid him of the unwanted customer. His wandering mind mused that the people of the cantons and foreign states he'd set up in over the years must have felt the same way.

What else could he do? Logical thought had already abandoned him. The wobbling universe stirred up his guts and he coughed up a slurry of stolen goods, though it did nothing to cure his eyes and ears. The pain persisted as if to mock him, asking if *he* had ever been the type to hear out a plea for mercy.

Beyond the curtain of noise, he could hear a clash of swords. Maybe his subordinates were still struggling. The man made a mental note to ask them how they managed to withstand or avoid this awful sensation once all this was said and done.

Strangely, his functional sense of touch was also beginning to forsake him. Whatever wall—in truth, he had indeed fallen down, making this the ground—his face was planted in was covered in something akin to short grass, and it suddenly began to melt into a soupy quagmire. The earth softened, as if hundreds of men had marched through on a rainy day to pulverize it into mud.

The captain desperately tried to free his face to avoid drowning, but someone

collapsed on top of him, slamming it back down. Buried in the bog, he could do nothing as a precise jolt of pain assaulted his thumb.

[Tips] As the cornerstone of grip, losing a thumb gives severe penalties to many stat checks. Using a spade or hoe may be possible with some effort, but wielding a sword to any acceptable degree is unthinkable. Furthermore, the powerful restorative abilities of the magia and bishops capable of regrowing a digit require permission from the College or corresponding church for use, respectively, making the medical operation a closely guarded state practice.

Running into a snag mid-quest is a trope as old as time. The GM, who art in heaven, hath rolled the dice, and my road event turned out to be a bust. I was on a mission without any bosses or grand goals; no one has ever asked for a wandering monster encounter on the path to a mere fetch quest. What if this jinxed me into some kind of climactic fight?

“Is *one* round trip without incident too much to ask for?” I groaned.

I flicked the blood off of Schutzwolfe and returned her to her sheath. With that, I dispelled the Unseen Hand and Farsight spells I’d used to turn each sword into a weapon of my own with Independent Processing.

Handling six appendages on top of my own had pushed my limits, and a throbbing pain assaulted the back of my skull. As methodologies went, it was far from fuel efficient. I could only utilize Enchanting Artistry and Hybrid Sword Arts with all my Hands at a level fit to be called a VIII: Master for five minutes at most. If I dumbed things down to simple swings or half-assed my Shortbow Marksmanship, I could hang in there for an hour or two, but alas.

The fatal flaw of my combo build exposed itself in its inability to fight a lengthy battle. *If only mana stones had been written into the world as consumables that replenished mana...*

“We’ll be here till winter if we keep getting held up like this,” I groaned.

“Erich, you just cut down over thirty men. Hearing you complain like we had to take a minor detour on the road is...honestly, it’s a bit freaky, even for me.”

I turned toward the gentle clapping of hooves to see Mika riding Castor, with Polydeukes in tow—the latter of the steeds had run off when I'd leapt off of him. My friend's stunning features were as supremely androgynous as always; it was a wonder how even his most troubled expression remained suave.

However, I had a bone to pick with his accusatory tone.

"I could say the same to you," I retorted. "You were the one that combined mutative *and* migratory magic to turn the ground into mortar so we could trap them in the dirt."

I hadn't been the only one to participate in this encounter. A shadow swooped down from the heavens and objected to my retort with a clamorous caw.

Don't back talk my master, the raven seemed to say. He was a large specimen with a glistening black coat—as familiars went, he fit my old chum's sensibilities to a tee.

Familiars were arcane life-forms other than demibeasts—hounds, birds, bugs, and the like—that had been modified to suit magia needs. Imbuing the creatures with supernatural abilities took many generations of acclimatization, so nowadays the labor-intensive industry was on a decline.

"Your familiar is so soft on you," I said.

"Jealous, huh? My little Floki's such a good boy." Mika puffed up his chest with pride, and the raven seemed to smugly accept the praise, earning it a pat on the beak. Floki was a quintessential courier: it delivered messages both written and verbal, and even had a Vision Sharing spell built into its body. I could see why its owner was so keen on showing it off. A thoroughbred familiar like Mika's was worth a fortune, and that his master had handed it down to him for free was proof of how much he was loved as a disciple.

That said, I couldn't help but feel like Mika was forgetting something. Of course, I'd had no qualms when he'd found the bandits while giddily letting his new familiar take to the skies. But *he* had been the one to suggest we pass judgment on these evildoers; I'd been content to ride off the road to avoid them.

Admittedly, slaying bandits was a good-guy move that came with bonus loot; any sane player character would engage them without a second thought. I didn't know if Mika had been taken by bloodlust or succumbed to that infernal mental disease that plagues children around the age of fourteen, but it stood that he had been the one most zealous about the fight. My contribution had been our plan of action—*after* he'd already scoped out their entire formation with Floki.

"Fine, fine," I said. "On account of your esteemed familiar's additional testimony, I hereby forfeit our 'who's scarier' contest."

"I don't think there's enough room for doubt for you to *choose* to lose..."

Two against one was bad odds. Besides, I wasn't inclined to complain about my friend recognizing my strength. But just between you and me, Mika's supportive magic would have been downright criminal in mass combat. If one were to encircle the enemy and prepare a unit of archers to attack at range, his spells would set up a horrifying beatdown.

That said, today's pitiful victims were the petty thieves we'd cleaned up and not me, so I brushed the thought aside. I'd taken all of their thumbs to prevent any real resistance, and now the mortar was nice and dry, leaving them with no avenue for trickery. Mika had buried the first eight men all the way up to their necks, so we didn't have to worry about them fleeing either.

Living up to the oikodomurge name, are we? Architectural magia primarily specialized in the creation of buildings, renovation of cities, and maintenance of sewer systems. Yet as soon as they nudged their talents toward combat, this horror was the result. It was no wonder that the Empire was willing to bestow titles and positions to keep its strongest magia bound to the nation.

Just as we settled down and prepared to call a patrol with Mika's familiar, my acute ears picked up on a faint clink. The characteristic sound of metal betrayed a pent-up force being released.

Keeping our positions relative to the noise in mind, I cast a spell. Three sounds rang out in succession: the firing of an arrow, the splitting of air, and...the tearing of a hole in space.

"What?!"

I wheeled around and summoned a Hand to swipe a dagger from the nearest enemy, which I plunged into the crossbowman's palm. It bit into the flesh between his bones, pinning it to the earth almost in reproach for his sorry attempt at revenge.

I'd been a bit careless. Crossbows needed thumbs to be aimed properly, but the bandit was crawling on the ground and only needed his index finger to pull the trigger. Next time, I swore I'd take two fingers instead of one. I'd have to tell the poor saps I crossed paths with in the future to send any complaints to this guy.

"That was close," I said. "Mika, you all right? My bad, I should've been more thorough."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine... Sorry for the trouble, Erich." As he spoke, he ran his hand across his chest as if to make sure it really hadn't been shot. All the while, his eyes never left the gash in space.

Lo and behold, my answer to all my questions of growth: space-bending magic. Many nights ago, Lady Agrippina had sent me a message that detailed the inner workings of the craft—a craft which, might I remind you, was considered a technology as lost as it was forbidden. I'd nearly blown a gasket realizing that she'd sent it my way on a *slip of paper*, and followed through by questioning her the following day. Her response had been, "It isn't as if the average person could parse this text anyhow." Faced with such flagrant disregard, I'd simply given up on her.

I was soon made to know why space-bending magic was considered all but lost. The cost of acquisition was just absurd, even with Lady Agrippina teaching me. Fully mastering the art required enough experience points to max out more than a few skills or traits.

The underlying reason lay with the fact that the mere rupture of physical reality required unholy amounts of experience—acquiring this at Scale I had taken the lion's share of my savings—and things like choosing a destination or connecting two points were considered add-ons. Perfecting the spell as a safe means of transport necessitated all sorts of expensive tweaks, not to mention that the size and duration of each tear scaled with mastery.

Opening a portal to who-knows-where wasn't exactly the height of consistency one might hope to achieve. The whole point of space-bending magic was to teleport to distant lands in the blink of an eye.

However, a shift in perspective showed that this was fine in its own way: I had an absolute shield that could disappear even the most unstoppable attack to the far reaches of reality (or wherever it went, since I wasn't really sure myself).

What Professor Leizniz had shown me led me to the formation of my first completed build. Knowing that I'd continue to rely on swords as my main weapon, I brought my Hybrid Sword Arts from Scale VI to the doorstep of IX: Divine. At this point, I could wield up to seven weapons (if I could get my hands on some) at once to deal with crowds. While I still had the option of using giant weapons like I had against Helga, I found the sight of six floating blades as skilled as me far more oppressive from the enemy's perspective.

I'd also committed some resources to my Unseen Hands. Namely, the Iron Fist add-on transformed my ad-libbed shields into a barrier tough enough to proudly match up to any armor. Layering them together could create an impenetrable wall, and I could wrap them around my body for a low-cost force field that offered a full range of motion.

Sacrificing a Hand that could be swinging a sword for defensive means was unsatisfying, but this essentially meant I had an armor steroid that I could fit in as a minor action. I was quite pleased with how unsurmountable I'd become for any enemy that relied exclusively on physical attacks.

To that end, I blew a massive sum on upgrading Parallel Processing to Independent Processing. Despite the expense, I maintained that my heightened ability to multitask was worth it. My housework was faster than ever, and my Hands were no longer subconsciously linked to my body like they had been in my fight with Helga.

I wasn't even using my new mental faculties to their fullest potential. I could probably use at least ten concurrent Hands without needing more brain power. Tacking on more Hands was getting relatively expensive, though, so I would only consider it if I had a ton of spare change.

Space-bending magic slotted in as my answer to anything that couldn't be

stopped by a measly physical barrier. Although the mana costs were steep, any attack that went through one of my space tears was gone for good; a universal counter to broken enemy moves was sure to pay dividends. I had one more secret weapon left, so I hoped to one day find the leeway to get all the add-ons needed for human teleportation.

“I guess I should hit them with another one,” I said, readying the parlor trick that I’d developed with the last of my experience.

Roughly 75,000 candelas of blinding light and 150 decibels of sheer noise spewed forth from my left hand, causing the fallen bandits to writhe in pain. Receiving a second dose so soon had likely ruined their eardrums, but they were slated for far worse once the imperial knights got their hands on them, so I had no need for guilt. Not even the thin fan-made booklets circulating Japanese geekdom could compare to the terrible fates they had in store.

My spell was simple: it was a mutation of powdered dolomite and ammonium salt—both readily available for purchase at various magus workshops in the capital—into magnesium and ammonium perchlorate. An initial ignition was all I needed to replicate the elements of a stun grenade with magic.

Additionally, I’d spent a good deal of time tweaking auxiliary spells to aim the light and sound so that I couldn’t even see the effects. The final product was a move that temporarily disabled enemies without resorting to lethal force.

Naturally, I’d been inspired by the films and games of my past life. Flashbangs were splendid tools that could be used in anything from hostage rescue to enemy suppression, and came with the perk of not totally destroying their environment. Although the arcane version wasn’t quite up to the standard of my memories, it was serviceable. Plus, it was mana efficient, easy, and fast enough to fit in between actions. I know I was the one who’d come up with the idea, but this was a stroke of genius.

I mean, sure, it was also a ripoff of the magus Professor Leizniz had shown me, but I’d expanded on his technique enough to say that my version was more of an homage. Acknowledging one’s own successes is important, okay?

“All right, I’ll look for some patrolmen. I’m sure they’ve got knights standing guard on the main highway at this time of year anyway.” Mika pulled out a

sheet of paper and scribbled something down. He was going to tie a message onto his familiar's leg like a carrier pigeon, no doubt.

I began wondering how much money we'd make from this. I'd heard that even the lowliest bandit grunts fetched a decent price during harvest season. Not too long ago, I'd seen a few who'd been publicly hanged at a few dozen librae a pop. Apparently, the living bandit chief had been bought by the crown for a whopping five drachmae.

What was more, no one would complain if we looted their belongings—though, obviously, the goods they'd stolen were to be returned—so we were sure to find a bit of money there. Their equipment seemed solid, and I suspected we'd earn a pretty penny if we got the state to buy it off of us. Carrying all this home was sure to be a hassle, but surely these vagrants had a freight carriage lying around somewhere that the Dioscuri could pull along.

Wait, I forgot about the bonus for live captures. We had a little over thirty breathing captives... *Are we rich?* Even after splitting the bounty in half, this would be enough to put my savings at a number that could realistically pay for Elisa's tuition this year.

Life was good, God was in His heaven, and all was right with the world. Good triumphed over evil, and the heroes smiled as they celebrated their victory. Today's Henderson reading was nice and low.

But, well, back-to-back fights with all my Unseen Hands working at full throttle and the use of space-rending shields had left me drained of mana. My headache was getting worse, and the desolation that accompanied it was unbearable.

"Hark, esteemed comrade of mine."

"Huh? What's with the act out of nowhere, Erich?"

My childish body was still ignorant of cost-effectiveness. As prompt as children are to regain their vigor, they also suffer from a shallower pool of stamina. Frankly, I was doing great for my age...right?

"I'm tired," I said. "Can we take a break?"

So who could find fault with a reward of respite at the top of the hill?

[Tips] The patrolling guards of the Empire offer unparalleled safety on the roads. However, the unluckiest travelers still find themselves running into situations like these.

As I gazed at the unbounded skies, I was possessed by the sensation that I might fall upward into their refreshing abyss. I felt no fear—just an excitement that I might drown in that beautiful blue. A few thin autumn clouds rolled into view, and I could only dream of how they'd feel if I could hug them.

Speaking of hugs, I'd received a letter from Margit a week prior. She'd grabbed ahold of a merchant caravan due for a visit to the capital and entrusted them with mail addressed to me. Judging from her message, she'd sent it a short while before I reached Berylin myself, and it had taken some time to get to me.

The letter primarily touched on how things were going back home, and just as I'd predicted, Heinz had already managed to fill Miss Mina's belly. My sister-in-law was skinny, and the bulge in her stomach was noticeable after two months. Rumors of her pregnancy had spread across the canton like wildfire, especially since the couple were now the second fastest to conceive after marriage in local history; the old man who told us tall tales of the fey coin in our youth retained his throne, as he'd knocked up his wife in a mere month back in the day.

I was now an uncle, and delighted to be one too. While I'd experienced this feeling once before in a distant world, I never tired of celebrating my family's good fortune.

All things said, the continuation of my bloodline was cause for joy. This little bandit episode of mine would bring in some cash, so I would need to open up my light wallet to prepare some kind of birthday celebration for my nephew or niece, as paltry as it would be. Such gifts meant nothing to the newborn baby, but to learn that there had been people so excited for their birth at a later age was sure to make them happy.

...Still, I wonder why I'm thinking about these sorts of things from atop my

friend's lap?

"How are you feeling?" Mika asked.

Fine and dandy, I thought, peering up to meet the handsome boy's gaze.

I looked him over like he was an alien life-form, his cool expression as androgynous as ever. Confused by my analytical glare, he cocked his head and smiled; with a bit of ingenuity, he could make a living off that smile alone.

The autumn breeze gently blew at his wavy black hair, giving me the full scope of his shapely nose and girlish lips. The amber gemstones he had for eyes alone reinforced my confidence that, in a few years, all the well-to-do dames of the world would toss their lives to the wayside for a chance at his hand. Hell, I could see *men* straying off the beaten path for a shot at that.

I wasn't about to fuss about getting a front-row seat to the sort of face that healed headaches via sheer aesthetic appeal. Still, this seating arrangement of ours wasn't without its problems.

Sure, I had been the one to suggest we take a break, and sure, I'd wanted to lay down to alleviate my splitting headache and mana exhaustion. But I failed to see how Mika managed to come to the conclusion that he ought to lend me his lap.

So why did I say yes? Well, his legs looked like they'd make a better pillow than my arm, and I'd laid my head down before I knew it. Troublingly enough, I'd been right: my long years of training had given me a good bit of hardened muscle, where Mika's legs retained a comfortable bounce to them. It was a bit strange how little muscle he'd put on, considering we'd been going on longer rides lately.

Come to think of it, this was my first time laying in someone's lap as Erich. I hadn't been able to ask Margit, since she physically didn't have a lap to sleep on.

"Boy, it's even longer than before... Your hair sure does grow fast." Mika cut off my meandering thoughts and picked up a lock of my hair. I felt a gentle tug on my scalp. *Ah, drat...he's toying with me.*

"Hey, what are you doing?" I asked.

“Come on, my hands are empty and I like how your hair feels.”

I couldn't see, but judging by feel, he was carefully tying my hair into a braid. Now that it had grown to reach well past my neck, I had to make sure to push my bangs back so that I could see. Still, the feminine do he was styling was hard to swallow.

“Can you turn over some? I can't reach this bit,” Mika said.

“Uh, sure?”

Why am I letting this—hey, wait, stop picking flowers. Hold it, don't put it in my hair! What's wrong with your sense of fashion? This sort of hair is meant for Elisa. Styling me like a princess is just going to end with someone pouring cold water on me and the flower garden on my head.

“Done,” he said. “You'll need to get up for the finishing touches. Come on, lift your head.”

I wasn't exactly in a position to refuse after all his ergonomic support. As I engaged my abs to hoist my upper half, I felt him take one of the braids he'd made from my bangs and loop it behind my head.

What was this called again? A crown braid? Whatever it was, the arrangement was trending in urban centers, and I'd seen a fair number of women wearing the style in daily life, which beckoned the question: why was I wearing it?

“Mika, if you want to play with hair so badly, why don't you grow out your own?”

“Hm? No, I'm good. Short hair suits me. When it gets longer, the curls get way out of hand.” As he spoke, my friend continued to litter my head with white clovers.

...Did I do something to you?

At any rate, my headache was almost gone, so I prepared myself to slowly unravel his work. The patrolmen would soon arrive, and I didn't want them to see me looking—

“Oh, it looks like they're here,” Mika said.

Dammit. All is wrong with the world...

[Tips] Gods do not directly smite mortals for blasphemous behavior. At most, they send an apostle in their stead. Offhand jokes and mockery are everyday occurrences; the ensuing fights between the sinner and holy men do not fall under the realm of divine punishment.

“So, you’re telling me you boys came across these bandits on an errand and decided you were going to arrest them yourselves?”

“Yes, sir, that’s about right.”

Henrik von Runingen was a decorated imperial knight, having patrolled the bustling tradeways for sixteen years. He was a unigenerational noble—meaning his title and the stipend it afforded could not be passed down to a son or daughter—without territory, but the wanting honors did nothing to stymie his unfettered loyalty to the Empire. All his life, he’d offered his blade in battle to protect the streets of his nation...but on this day, he experienced something he’d never seen before.

Runingen had been leading a unit of seven men on an unpopular byway when a raven came swooping down with a message tied to its leg. This was all part of a day’s work: mages routinely employed all manners of familiar beasts to ask the closest patrol for help or rescue.

However, the knight’s expectations were off. The letter was not a plea for help, but a request that he come to take a handful of captured bandits off the mage’s hands. While a tad atypical, this too was a situation he’d encountered before. Whether it was a sorcerous adventurer or a magus with a strong moral compass, about once a year Runingen had to help powerful spellcasters process disproportionately large numbers of apprehended criminals.

Even with that in mind, he hadn’t imagined that he’d be greeted by two pretty boys that clearly weren’t of age. One of the children could only be identified as a boy from his clothing, whereas the other had a head full of white clovers like the fair princess of a flower bed. Runingen was at a loss for words.

If they had said something cute like, “We saw a thief!” then he would have

figured they'd spotted a crime while they were playing and thought to report it. In that case, he would've patted their heads and rewarded their good work with a copper coin to let them buy some candy.

What was an adult meant to do when two children showed up with a whole crew of neutralized bandits? Not even the longtime veteran had a ready answer for times like these.

"Um...Sir Runingen? We found the twenty-four men they mentioned over this way, and...they're trapped in some kind of hardened paste. It seems they're all alive."

"Er, sir? I found eight men buried from the neck down on my end."

The cherry on top was that the bandits had been captured in manners so pitiful that Runingen almost felt sorry for them. This was clearly not the work of an average person: they had to be either mages, magia, or straight up alfar to do something like this.

"The two of us have ties to the Imperial College, and have some trifling knowledge of magic," the blond boy said.

"I am enrolled as an official student, and my friend here is a mage serving a professor," the raven-haired boy added. "Thus, we have some small amount of practical skill, as meager as it may be."

Trifling? Meager? How can you utter these words so shamelessly?

These two boys were claiming that they'd rounded up some thirty full-grown men. Judging from the marks left on the scene, they'd confronted the crooks *head-on*. Upon further inspection, Runingen found that the bandits squirming around in the dirt were all missing their thumbs. *Are you telling me this is how you subdued them?*

Everything about the situation was strange. Yet when Runingen requested to see proof of their citizenship, the boys obediently pulled out a pair of slates, and his authenticating counterpart glowed blue (as opposed to the red that appeared for counterfeits) to confirm their identities.

"Sir! We've discovered what we believe to be a large campsite with a stolen imperial carriage on the premises!"

“There were traces of shallow graves too. Your orders, captain?”

Runingen had a duty to lead his men, all of whom were equally as perplexed as himself. He rubbed his temples for a brief moment and shifted gears: it would be much easier to treat the bandit-slayers like adults if he simply thought of them as ghastly *things* instead of children.

“Understood,” he said. “You two wait here. I’ll pen you a letter of referral after I survey the scene myself.”

Regardless of his mental struggles, he had a job to do. He needed to ascertain whether the bandits matched the descriptions of wanted criminals and take a headcount; otherwise, the little monsters wouldn’t be able to claim their reward from the state.

A part of his brain clung to common sense, whispering how the bounty would be too great a sum for mere children, or how he ought to lecture them about not taking such enormous risks, but he pushed those thoughts to the side and focused on his work.

Common sense was important, but there was a time and a place for it. This was neither the time nor the place.

Besides, the world was full of people whom it was better not to dwell on. Wholly legitimate stories abounded of outliers who cut down enemy generals on their first battle, and dragon slayers who had only just come of age. Wiping out a band of ne’er-do-wells at the age of twelve or so was cute in comparison.

Runingen suppressed his rebellious heart and mind, and made off to look over the captured hooligans covered in dried mortar, like any good patrolman was wont to do.

[Tips] Bandit bounties are not paid immediately. Such matters require thorough investigation, and rewards are usually handed out a month after the initial capture.

The patrolmen were chewing on all sorts of emotions as they bound up the criminals and marched them along. And, well, I could see why. I would question

my sanity too if a pair of brats showed up with this many captives, especially if one of them looked like a total moron.

“Wow, I’m looking forward to when they finish processing everything,” Mika said, with the patrolman’s letter in hand.

I was frantically picking out all the flowers he’d planted with my Hands, and couldn’t help but wonder how he remained unabashed seeing me so desperate to undo it all. However, I had to concede that he’d done a good job with the braid, and having my annoying hair out of the way had honestly been pleasant enough that I’d almost agree to have it done up again in the future.

“Paying the bills is going to be so much easier,” he went on, happily flapping the slip of paper. Suddenly, his brow scrunched up. “But are you sure you want to split it evenly?”

“Duh, I’m sure,” I said. “You pulled your fair share of the load.”

I was the one who’d suggested this distribution in the first place. Although I’d been alone on the front lines, Mika had been the one to find the bandits so we wouldn’t fall into their trap—prior knowledge was the only reason we’d dealt with their initial volley so easily. On top of that, as a longtime solo player, having a backline ally to debuff enemies in battle was cause for thanks.

Another massive contribution had been his ability to round up all the goons after the fight had ended. Left in my hands, it would’ve been backbreaking work. I didn’t have enough rope on me to tie them all up or enough mana to keep them stunned until help arrived. And obviously, I wasn’t barbaric enough to *want* to ruin all of their legs...

Basically, I’m trying to say that I was incredibly grateful for Mika’s assistance. Combat was about more than brandishing one’s bladework in the enemy’s face: mopping up after the win was similarly integral. What moron would refuse to compensate a friend who smoothed over the most tedious part? I didn’t plan on joining the ranks of the exile-happy fools that had been so common in the fiction of my past life.

Still, he seemed legitimately torn up over splitting the reward in half, so I tried to take some weight off his shoulders with banter.

“What,” I said, “do you not take imperial bounties as payment for your pillow services?”

“All right, you got me.” His usual smile returned, and I reaffirmed that beauty was ideally appreciated at its best. “Just so you know, my establishment doesn’t deal in change.”

“No worry. Consider it a tip,” I concluded with flourish. “Anyway, let’s get going. I want to get there before sundown. Three nights of camping out might be good on the wallet, but I miss taking real baths.”

“Sure, let’s pick up the pace.”

We loaded up our measly loot, hopped onto the horses, and left our detour stop behind us. As an aside, we relinquished all but one sword to the patrolmen. While we could’ve taken a carriage and sold the goods ourselves, imperial knights offered reliable rates mandated by law. They were a bit lower than market prices, but adding the value of the bandits’ possessions to our bounty was far more convenient than trying to haul all their stuff to sell with our own two hands.

Thus, I’d picked out just one sword to bring along. Picking up a slew of weapons was well and good, but carrying them around was out of the question. Not even Polydeukes could lug a load like that. Instead, I chose to keep only the bandit captain’s well-maintained blade. There had been others of good make that I would have loved to snatch up, but it wasn’t meant to be.

With this matter behind us, it’s time I unveiled the details of our assignment: our little errand had been requested by none other than Lady Agrippina herself. The reward she’d promised was a whopping *drachma*—sure to warp my perception of money for when I became an adventurer, no doubt—and she’d given me ten librae of funds to complete my mission. What’s more, the silver pieces were ours to keep if we had any left over, leading us to promptly begin cutting corners.

Mika and I had camped out on the road for days to arrive at a town called Wustrow. It was a small city that lay just outside the Empire’s most arctic region in the northwest. Developed around the local magistrate’s castle, it was the capital of the surrounding cantons and a hub for material goods—just like every

other rural city.

Their main contributions were in agriculture and livestock, though sometimes they allocated parts of the latter resource for leatherwork. With a population of eight thousand, the urban center was slightly below the median for the Empire.

However, the town was also home to what Lady Agrippina described as an acclaimed scrivener, known for his masterful transcriptions of various texts. The story went that he'd lived in Berylin long ago, but grew weary of the bustling crowds and orders for extravagant books in his old age. Sick of the capital, he retired to his hometown of Wustrow.

Transcribing arcane tomes was a skill-intensive process, and copies of mystic texts were almost exclusively made by the hands of needy students—unsuccessful researchers and professors sometimes joined their ranks—over many sleepless nights. Factoring in the professional designers and bookbinders needed to finish the product, the rarity of academic literature needed little further explanation.

However, career scribes had various means of generating the mana needed to produce accurate, high-quality tomes. I was to visit Sir Marius von Feige, a man who was said to pen copies indistinguishable from the original. Of note was the fact that Lady Agrippina—*the* Lady Agrippina—had uttered his full name off the tip of her tongue.

The madam had also described him as extraordinarily obstinate, so I was ready for a difficult negotiation. But the reward was good for a fetch quest, and above all else, trying to convince a stubborn quest NPC was so very appropriate.

Mika's master had coincidentally just been roped into supervising tax allocation from the fall harvest (a palpable reminder that the Trialist Empire treated its magia as political entities), so I invited him along during his spell of leisure.

At long last, we were nearing our destination. We'd hit a hiccup on the way, but now that we were here, our job was practically done. All that remained was to do my best to earn Elisa's tuition. *I wonder what kind of souvenir she'll like?*

[Tips] Transcription is the process of copying a sheepskin book by hand and

hiring a local artisan to bind the finished sheets together. Some arcane tomes lose all meaning if the scribe's handwriting does not conform to specific mystic protocols. As a result, well-made copies can equal the value of an original text; the rarest are prized on the same level as noble titles.

We arrived a bit past evening. Unlike the towering fortifications of major cities like Berylin, we strode up to a gate surrounded by simple walls no higher than three meters. Though the urban planning had clearly followed imperial guidelines, the town would crumble in half a month under siege.

Of course, being a mere two days' ride from Berylin for a hurried messenger, the people of Wustrow had no need to invest heavily in their defenses. Rhine would be in dire straits for a city this close to the capital to fall; at that point, the Empire would be busy relocating the crown or risking the fate of the nation on a decisive battle, not caring for a minor town.

After passing through a fittingly casual identity check at the front gate, we paid our fifty assarii of entrance dues—I'd initially been shocked, but I suppose this was in place of a toll for using the highways—and entered the city. Of course, our first order of business was to head straight for...

"All right, let's find an inn."

"Yeah, let's."

...lodging. The quest could wait.

Seeking somebody out at suppertime defied common sense. This was doubly true for anyone Agrippina du Stahl, known bearer of many girthy sticks up her ass, considered to be *obstinate*. I presumed that meant Sir Feige was quite a character, and no amount of caution could be too much. At worst, by my figuring he would resort to force as soon as we knocked on his door; preparing with that in mind was best for my mental and physical health.

To combat this, I'd prepared a gift of confections from the capital. I'm sure my master's ample allowance was in part a subtle hint that I was to give this sort of diplomacy some thought.

"Excuse me, may I have a moment?" I asked.

“Hm? What do you need?”

Regardless, the main act would have to wait for tomorrow. I stopped an idle guard and asked him if he knew any cheap motels in the area. He obliged, and I gave him a copper coin for his troubles. This too had also taken me some time to get used to: seeing rural officers readily accept “thanks” was always a bit strange.

We thanked him and walked through town. Houses lined the street at sparse intervals, and though the main road was neatly packed with cobblestone, all the minor avenues were simply flattened dirt. The street lights illuminating the capital were nowhere to be found, and the area felt like the truest representation of idyllic pastoralism.

The motel—to clarify, these were inns that only rented rooms and served no meals—was located in a laborers’ district near the outer walls, and we rented a room for ten assarii. The building had a small tilt to it that betrayed its age, but the interior was surprisingly well put together. Fortunately, it seemed the guard we’d asked was not in bed with the innkeepers.

I bought Castor and Polydeukes their spots at a nearby stable which serviced all of the lodgings in the area. Again, the location had evidently worn down with time, but the father and sons keeping the stables seemed to be earnest folk. Despite the fact that we were underage, they referred to us respectfully as “Misters,” which inspired some confidence in their devotion to good service.

They supplied water and hay, charging fifteen assarii per day per horse, or twenty-five for two. While it felt odd to pay more for them than I had for myself, beasts of burden required far more upkeep. Plus, the Dioscuri were our dear partners on this adventure of ours, and I wasn’t going to complain about them resting up in a nice place. I added a five-assarii tip and asked the stablehands to feed them plenty of fodder.

Next, Mika and I were off to fill up our own bellies.

“Now then, what do you want to eat?” I asked.

“Hm,” he said, “I don’t see that many food stalls around.”

I hadn’t realized until he mentioned it, but he was right. Frankly, the capital

was aberrant in how it housed an eatery or stall at every street corner. Back in Kongistuhl, we had one pub and one restaurant, and they were only open during seasons where travelers and caravans were common. The only stalls I'd seen back home were the ones visiting merchants set up during the spring and fall.

"Crap," I groaned, scratching my head. "We should've asked that guard about food too."

In fact, I could've asked the stable boys just moments ago. With how genial they'd been, surely they would've been willing to fill us in on the dining situation around town. *Maybe I should head back and—*

"How about there, Erich?" Mika tugged on my sleeve and pointed at a pub. "They've got a lot of foot traffic. Maybe they're good?"

I turned to see yet another ragged building, but there were indeed quite a few customers geared up for travel passing through the entrance. A handful of patrons seemed to be adventurers or mercenaries, judging from the light padding on their chests and arms.

To digress for a moment, Wustrow was the same as the capital in the sense that only the city guard, nobility, and bodyguards for the former party had the privilege of carrying weapons. I surmised that the arms ban was standard throughout the Empire. Municipal governments weren't exactly eager to see chance encounters between their citizens end in bloodshed.

Schutzwolfe, the looted sword, and my set of armor were all stowed away at our inn. The only combat-ready equipment I had on my person were my gloves, the cowl wrapped around my neck, the fey knife in my sleeve, and my lunar ring. Granted, having a mystic catalyst on hand made me capable of doing whatever I wanted to if I were so inclined.

Thinking about it more deeply, perhaps the reason ring-shaped catalysts had gone out of style had more to do with state policy than a modern trend toward stronger staffs. If, say, the Empire had secretly spread propaganda against the rings, I could see why. The materials needed to make them may have been rare, but the things were absolute menaces. It was terrifying to think a piece of jewelry was far better suited to assassination than any dagger, and far easier to

sneak into any location to boot.

Putting my awful imagination to rest, Mika and I headed into the tavern. The space indoors was abundant, but the close-packed tables full of customers left little breathing room in the dining hall. The choking odor of liquor and crowds of mensch hit us in a wave, mixing with the smell of food to forge the pinnacle of sensory chaos.

Clinking mugs and vulgar laughs filled the air, and those playing cards or board games aired their joys and sorrows. The place was the spitting image of a frontier bar.

This right here—this is it! This is how it's meant to be! A traditional fantasy scene like this was a welcome sight after a lifetime of ludicrous twists.

That said, the appearance of two children didn't draw in the classic trope of a faux tough guy telling us to go home to drink our mommas' milk. Caravans employed indentured servants around my age, and I could pick out a few among the customers tonight.

"Hey there!" a waitress said energetically. "Gimme a minute, okay? It's busy, but we've still got space for you!"

The girl's collar cut deep into her chest—a telltale feature of north Rhinian folk garb. Her dirty blonde hair was fashioned into a thick braid, and her freckled cheeks dimpled into a cheery, heliacal smile. She was the archetypal countryside waitress in every way.

She led us to a pair of open counter seats in back. A few men were playing cards right beside us, copper and silver pieces flashing between them after each hand.

Local bars were ordinarily the ideal spot to gather intel, but I had no mind to talk to our fellow patrons. A tavern near the inns was sure to attract mainly travelers and businessmen who likely knew little about Sir Feige.

"Now, what'll it be, big guys?" the waitress asked. "We just butchered some sheep, so the stew's really tasty tonight!"

Mutton? I thought. This was a bit peculiar, as the signature Rhinian protein was pork. Sheep needed grazing pasture, making them more difficult to raise—

although on second thought, perhaps that was exactly why they were kept out here. With harsh cold came the challenge of overwintering livestock, and sheep held up well in the bitterest months.

“Wow, I haven’t had that in ages,” Mika said. “I’ll take the mutton stew.”

I’d almost forgotten that my friend hailed from around these parts. He probably knew what he was doing, so I followed in his footsteps and ordered another portion of the same.

“Boy, I can’t believe I get to have mutton again. I’m excited. No one ever serves it in the capital, you know.”

The Trialist Empire was a densely wooded nation without the real estate for ruminants. Any flat plots that would have made for good pastures were converted into cropland instead. In place of cows or sheep, Rhinians raised hogs, since they could be left to live off acorns or what have you largely unsupervised.

Land-to-beef output ratios were so high that only the nobility could afford to savor the markedly scarce commodity. We commoners were so far removed from these meats that we’d never get a shot at them even if we could cough up the cash. All this must have left Mika starving for a taste of home.

Speaking of which, it had been a long time since I’d eaten rice. I’d grown used to my diet of bread and pork as an imperial citizen, but I pined for the flavors that were etched into my being. Miso soup was another example. I hadn’t had a drop of it for an entire lifetime, and still the taste remained unforgettable. I suppose rice and dashi were simply indispensable to the Japanese soul; their flavors were stamped onto my identity itself, never to be lost.

I’d once heard that some southern region bordering the ocean was partial to rice, but I doubted their crops were anything like the Japonica rice that had gone through countless generations of selective breeding to get to where it was. Centuries of blood, sweat, and tears had gone into developing a staple grain that was tasty by itself, and it was of incomparably higher quality than its forefathers. Of course, such ancestral rice could very well be delicious on its own merit, but the flavors in my memory were a long way away...

“I’m happy for you... Eat up tonight!” Taken by nostalgia, I grabbed my friend

by the shoulder and spoke with great passion. He eyed me like I'd lost my mind, but I was feeling too sentimental to care.

Incidentally, when our stews arrived at eight assarii a pop, Mika told me that it wasn't quite the same as back home. Too much ginger, apparently.

It tasted great, for what it was worth. The ginger counteracted the gamey smell, and the long stewing process had left the meat relatively tender. To be picky, I would have liked some pepper—either classic black peppercorns or the Japanese variant—or perhaps a side dish.

After finishing up our exotic meal, the two of us temporarily parted ways. Despite the petty differences, Mika had been pleased with the nostalgic dish, and said he was guaranteed sweet dreams if he slept now. He walked back to our motel, and I headed in the other direction to the public bathhouse to scrub off a few days' grime.

The bathhouse sat slightly beyond the city walls, beside a small brook used to flush away waste. It looked just as dinky as the rest of the city, but the citizenry had clearly stayed loyal to the location over the years; the facility was well-kept, and there were a decent number of customers.

I paid my entrance fee and stepped inside. The interior confirmed my suspicions; the simple baths were solidly built. They had the typical cold, lukewarm, and hot baths—*oh?* To my excitement, they even had a steam bath.

"Nice. It's been a while, so I guess I'll start there," I merrily said to myself. The free saunas in the capital were kind of, well, lukewarm. Urbanites and country kids evidently had different interpretations of suitable temperature, so I hoped that a bathhouse this out of the way would trend toward the tastes of the latter.

"Wow, I have the place all to myself."

As expected, the stove in the middle of the room was scorching hot. Water instantly vaporized on contact with a sizzling flourish, and the resulting smell and sensation sent me back in time. Every pail of water created more and more snow-white steam that raised the heat to a comfortable level, drawing out sweat from my pores.

Ahh, this is what a steam bath is all about.

I reminisced on the baths we used to take back home on our days of rest. Had I still been in Konigstuhl, this definitely would've been the year I shook Margit's invitations off to join the adult men's group. Looking back, I'd sort of let it slide because we were all so young, but letting all the children bathe together had been a questionable decision in the first place.

I continued relishing my one-man relaxation room for a few minutes until another guest came in. Of course, I wasn't boorish enough to complain about having to share the space; enjoying a bath with another person was wonderful in its own way.

The newcomer trudged through the clouds and sat next to me, leaving a comfortable space between us. I nodded my head as etiquette mandated, and I could tell from his foggy silhouette that he'd turned to face me.

"Ain't seen you 'round 'fore."

The man's imperial tongue had a unique rhythm to it—some northern dialect, perhaps. With the capital full of people speaking the prettiest language, I hadn't heard an accent like this before. Still, I was keeping up.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'm here on a little errand."

"Aye? Tough task for a youngin. How old're ya, kid?"

"I turned thirteen this autumn."

"Where from? Come this way all 'lone?"

The man's creaky tenor was tinged with the subdued sobriety of an old man. He was likely a local retiree getting along in his years. *Oh, he's the perfect person to ask.* A longtime resident was likely to know something about this von Feige character I was pursuing.

"No, sir," I said. "I came with a friend. I find camping by myself lonely, you see."

"Mm, good t'hear. Roads ain't safe this time o' year. But I gots to say, should'a grabbed a car'van to be real safe. Still, yer a clever lad," he said, reaching out beyond the veil of steam to pat me on the head. His touch was

gentle, but it was altogether different from the sensation of my parents' hands, or the occasional pet from Lady Agrippina. The jagged texture rubbing against my hair wasn't flesh—it was *bark*. To elaborate, it had the same qualities as the wood of an old, dried-up tree.

“Um, may I ask you a question?”

“What's it?” he asked.

Entering my fifth decade of total mental life, my wisdom wasn't just for show. I was well aware of how important preparation was to accomplishing any task. I wasn't the type to run into a monster den with blade swinging, unaware that a skeleton horde awaited me, uncowed by mere steel, more than once. *Only* once.

I'd done my research on the man I was to find. He was a talented scrivener who crafted brilliant transcriptions. He loved sweets. He exploded in fury when his work was interrupted. He was considered stubborn by every single person I'd asked. But most pertinently...

“I take it you are the esteemed Sir Feige. Am I mistaken?”

...he was an elderly treant. The fellow sitting by me was unmistakably a wooden man of considerable age. His limbs were knotted with twining branches and leaves, and his face was similarly adorned with what looked to be a large tree root curling onto itself to form his features. From between the gaps, his eyes shone through the steam like a set of glimmering scarabs.

His eyes opened wide—merely a figure of speech to liken his wooden expressions to my own—and looked me over from head to toe. Then he nodded magnanimously and his rustic speech morphed into a pristine palatial dialect.

“Indeed I am. Now then, little one, what business might you have with a withered old stump like myself?”

[Tips] Treants are technically humanfolk, but at heart they are nearer to spirits. They boast high magical competence as a result, and use their innate ties to nature to bolster their strength.

The bathing places of the Trialist Empire were minor amusement parks, of sorts. They had beds where one could order a massage, benches where friends could sit and chat, and even small exercise areas where patrons could enjoy a bout of wrestling.

Sir Feige and I left the sauna and found a bench near the cold water bath to cool off on. Seeing him in full, the peculiarity of the treant form struck me with renewed intensity. His face and limbs looked like gnarled bark that had happened to twist into the shape of a man. Without the twinkle in his eyes, his features could be written off as the effects of pareidolia manifesting on an old bit of timber.

Silver leaves adorned his crown like a head of hair, and the derricking of his branches evoked the image of an ancient tree. In this way, treants failed to differ from mensch: his body quietly told the tale of his age.

“As I’ve gotten up in years, all the water’s left my body. I come by the bathhouse to soak my dried lumber,” he said, waving over a waterboy—vendors dealing in food and drink were common sights to extend a visitor’s stay.

“Aye, ol’ man,” the waterboy said. “Here ’gain? Y’sure don’t tire o’ the place.”

“Baths’re all’s welcome,” Sir Feige responded. “Be here till I wilt. Ah, pour me yer finest.”

The old treant was apparently acquainted with the waterboy, who dutifully poured out a cup of refreshingly tart-smelling water into a glass.

“Give ’im one too,” Sir Feige added, treating me to a cupful. A bit of citrus and bark had been steeped in the icy beverage. “Feel free to drink up. Water that follows the drowning of steam—”

“—Is sweeter still than nectar?”

I blurted out the end to the familiar poem and took a swig, letting the reinvigorating moisture soak through my dehydrated body.

“Oh?” Sir Feige stroked the gray moss on his chin like a beard. “Familiar with the classics?”

“Bernkastel, yes? The great master of prose poetry?”

The line that we’d quoted came from a pastoralist song dating back to before the foundation of the Empire. This region had a long history of arrhythmic, emotionally muscular poetry, popularized in part thanks to its transmissibility amongst the uneducated. On a night long ago in woods far away, Margit and I had played a game that had evolved from this linguistic tradition.

At one point in my youth, I’d shut myself up in my local church’s library, reading through everything I could get my hands on. Theological works were a given, but the collection amassed by several generations of bishops included many anthologies of poems that spoke to peasant sensibilities. Rural bishops were ultimately rural people, and their tastes naturally reflected this.

“Indeed,” Sir Feige confirmed. “Quite fine work. He doesn’t need to affect some rarefied dialect to achieve elegance. The joy of life glows in every word, and the lingering impressions they leave are marvelous.”

“I completely agree. When I read his songs, they really do make me want to take a bath or go on a walk.”

Bernkastel was shrouded in mystery, and even his pen name was merely his place of birth. The existence of the original manuscripts he’d published—as opposed to mere transcriptions—suggested he wasn’t a commoner, but the passionate affection for prosaic life that pervaded his work was a far cry from the lifestyle enjoyed by the upper class. Modern Rhinian historians suspected him to have been either a lay poet with a noble patron, or a bastard child not wholly abandoned by his family.

As popular as he was, the contemporary sphere of aristocratic literature placed a great deal of worth on the technical mastery of language. Metrical poetry with clearly defined verses made such craftsmanship far more transparent, making them the preferred form for song. I hadn’t expected a master scrivener who’d built his name creating copies of works like these to have a fondness for prose poetry.

“Not many lads your age grasp his genius. I’m impressed.” The treant happily knocked back his water and ordered another glass each for both of us.

I knew exactly how he felt: purse strings were always looser when finding

another to share one's hobby with. I recalled how, when a new recruit who played tabletop games had joined my company, I'd become terribly philanthropic—though I could no longer even remember his name.

“Youths nowadays only talk about Verlaine this and Heinrich that. All they want is to be told the most obvious things as elaborately as possible. What they don't know is...”

What followed was a lengthy explanation—a rant, really—that I carefully absorbed while we hopped between hot water and steam to not let ourselves get cold.

I now saw why a man of his personality could be called difficult. He was as prideful as he was intelligent, and his craftsmanship was extraordinary enough for him to ascend from the common class. Yet from his long spiel, I gathered that he hadn't had the talent to birth his own beloved sagas; transcription was merely his attempt to remain close to them, whatever form they might take. To his dismay, those that sought his skills only asked him to copy famous tales or rare tomes, which were the furthest thing from his pure hobbyist's palate.

Had Sir Feige been an unremarkable scrivener, he would have likely been able to endure his work. Rather, such scribes were almost exclusively charged with manuscripts for disposable sagas and poems, so the man would have been happy to scribble away. It was evident from his rant that he appreciated the subtle differences in the way works affected him when read on different occasions.

Unfortunately, the treant was too skilled. His first mistake had been when he'd accepted a highly paid job to transcribe a novella—a “novel” commentary on a short article, as what constituted a novel on Earth was generally referred to as a story or legend—in an attempt to pay his bills. The requests had then come flooding in for novels and political opinion pieces, evolving into arcane tomes and historical documents. On the rare occasion he received a contract involving poetry, it never failed to conform to the tastes of high society... It was no wonder his clients dubbed him narrow-minded, given how motivationally unfit he was for his work.

The tragedy of Marius von Feige was that he had the skills to sustain his trade.

The gulf between that which he excelled in and that which he loved was heartbreaking.

Overbathing had made me thoroughly woozy by the time Sir Feige finished his soliloquy. Not that I regretted hearing out the whole thing, mind you: his depth of knowledge was a thing of beauty, and he'd taught me so many new things that I *gained experience* just by listening. A dizzy spell was a small price to pay.

"I'm sorry, little one," Sir Feige said, "I got a bit carried away. Forgive me; it's an old tree's bad habit."

"No need to apologize," I said. "I was enthralled from start to finish."

We stepped outside the bathhouse, and the cool autumn breeze restored my mental faculties. Looking up into the sky, the familiar white moon hid behind the sparse clouds as She prepared to emerge in full. On the other hand, the sick black moon was almost entirely out of sight.

"Now then, I don't recall hearing what you needed me for. What brings you to a withering shrub like me?"

Sir Feige benevolently offered me a chance to complete my main objective, and I decided to oblige. Had I been an adult, I would have followed proper etiquette and visited him in a more becoming manner on another day; however, children were at their best when innocently honest.

"Well, sir, my master has bid me to come and request the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites* that you once transcribed."

I bowed as deeply as I could, and the treant's brow jumped high, revealing that his scarab eyes were now glowing red.

As you can see, Lady Agrippina's task was not for me to place a new order with this scrivener. Sir Feige had already completed the transcription for the work in question, and had failed to hand it off to his client after a massive falling-out.

I'd done some research in hopes of finding out what I was supposed to procure, but I hadn't been able to find so much as a summary. "Forgotten" could be taken literally to mean that a god's name had been lost, but I hadn't come across the term in any of the theological texts I'd read thus far. Clearly,

knowledge on the subject was considered highly forbidden.

If nothing else, I was sure that a book venerating such entities was anything but kosher. In the event that I successfully negotiated for the thing, I would send it straight to Lady Agrippina without so much as opening the cover.

I had no plans of turning back to lose what I held dear, like Orpheus before me. My forefathers had graciously shown what terrible fates could await me; to avoid their footprints was the best way to honor their memory.

“Do you still have the tome in question in your possession?” I asked, still bowing. A discomforting creaking accompanied the sound of flocks of birds flying out of the nearby trees.

“Very well,” he said. “This isn’t something to speak of in public. Come along.”

At the edge of my vision, I saw Sir Feige’s feet turn away. Raising my head, I hurried after him.

[Tips] Throughout the annals of history, some gods have disappeared from a lack of faith or have reinvented themselves as the beliefs of their followers evolved.

Sir Feige led me to the base of a massive, awe-inspiring evergreen near the city walls. He explained that the tree was both his mother as a treant and his current abode.

Birth among treants was rather anomalous relative to the other sentient races: forsaking sexual reproduction, their kind arose from spirits housed in trees that eventually formed a self-concept. Once the treant broke away from their mother tree, they were said to live by its side until the day came that they found someplace they wanted to go.

“Come in.”

“Wow... This is incredible.” The hollow he’d invited me into was far larger than the physical exterior had suggested, and I failed to hold in my amazement when I saw the massive collection of books that decorated the room.

A dignified, caramel-brown work desk presided over the room's center; its make was every bit as impressive as the treant sitting at it. The dark chair, the back of which towered behind him, sang praises to the majesty of the space.

Bookshelves turned toward this centerpiece from every angle, each carefully lined with countless beautifully bound books. The texts had been meticulously sorted in order of author, and I recognized a handful of titles. Those I found familiar were the kinds of stories handled by cheap libraries—which rented works at a handful of assarii per day per book—and haphazardly bound. Yet here they were, polished with all the same care a dictionary or treatise might receive.

Everything about Sir Feige's room screamed a hobbyist's passion: "This is what I like! Have a problem with it?!" I had no doubt that the books on display here had been transcribed by the man himself, with the cost of binding coming out of his own pocket. These were truly made for him, and him alone.

"I know this saga!" I exclaimed. "Wait, I've seen this author's romances performed at the festival! There's a whole collection of his poems?!"

In some ways, this was a treasure trove. Although it was invaluable to a lover of legend, anyone more interested in power or rarity wouldn't so much as glance its way. *Wow, I guess fanatics really do exist everywhere.*

"Oh, you like them, do you? Would you like to take one home?"

"Really?!" I reflexively leapt at the scrivener's unexpected offer, only to immediately blush at my own shallow nature. Using my childishness as a weapon was fine, but I didn't actually want to be a kid. "E-Excuse my rudeness. I couldn't take something so valuable."

"No, I rarely have any visitors as excited about my collection as you are. Everything they bring me is downright boring, and they refuse anytime I suggest a saga, like they're too good for these tales. I got so sick of it that I left my workshop in the capital to come home. Leaving those nuisances behind and surrounding myself with my favorite legends is so refreshing." Sir Feige seemed at peace. "Still...there *is* a stain on my sanctuary."

The man unlocked a drawer on his desk and pulled out a single tome, which he tossed onto the table. Bound in black leather and extravagant bone

ornamentation, one look was enough to know that it was one of *those* items. Specifically, a brainless attempt to open it was the kind of action that prompted a 1D100 roll and a wicked, wicked smile lurking behind the GM's screen.

Unconsciously, I'd taken a step back. Its appearance was imposing on its own, and I was further unnerved that I could plainly see an ominous power seep from it with my own novice second sight. I didn't want to so much as touch the thing.

Don't just leave this thing sitting around like a normal book! Seriously, chain it up or something. At the very least, add a lock so no one can open it!

"This is the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites* your master seeks."

I swallowed back the nausea that accompanied my unspeakable discomfort, unable to break my gaze from the book's event horizon. This was not the same gruesome urge that compelled one to watch a horror movie through: I didn't want to look because it was scary, or because I needed to know what came next. The impulse was more malicious, more *evil*.

"The original request asked me to translate the ancient text to Rhinian as faithfully as I could. It's full of annotations to make sure that the original intent remains clear."

Which means I can read the thing if I open it. As soon as I made the connection, something in the back of my brain whispered, *read it*.

No, no, no, no way, absolutely not. While I was almost guaranteed to unlock some new skill for doing so, it was certainly the kind of skill I was meant to never touch. Any contact was sure to leave me equally touched in the head.

The presence of such a transparently foreign idea in my train of thought was proof enough that I was facing a malign relic. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if this would begin a long campaign that would only end when the thing was tossed into a volcano.

Branchy fingers slid across the cover, but there was no affection in Sir Feige's touch. As the creator of this terror, he knew how profoundly dangerous it was; contact was his way of confirming that it had yet to lose its awesome power.

"Little one, how much do you know about the divine?"

“The divine?” I repeated. “I was a regular churchgoer back home; I know the gods they bother to talk about in the lay texts, the sermons, and folklore.”

“Then I’m sure you know that the gods we worship are at war with other deities.”

I nodded. From what I understood, gods on this planet only held power here, and fought amongst themselves to secure mortal followers. History books explained that at some point, the divine abandoned direct combat, ending the Age of Gods. The Age of Antiquity that followed saw proxy wars waged via the faithful. Whether in the past or present, those that lost both battle and believers had a handful of possible fates ahead of them.

“Do you know what happens to a fallen god?” Sir Feige asked.

“I do. Any defeated god robbed of their followers...”

First, they could quietly be forgotten, melting into the void.

Second, they could be appropriated by whatever pantheon stripped them of their power. Reduced to a lesser divine entity or mythical beast, their eventual demise would come at the hands of mortals.

This method was easy to digest: the famously successful Abrahamic religions of my past world employed the same tactic. Alien gods had been converted into messengers of the devil trying to corrupt pious souls, and the occasional triumph of their foreign cultures attributed to fictitious saints. Holy wars varied little between worlds, it seemed.

Third and last, the conquered god could join another pantheon and reinvent themselves as a new being. This hit close to home, as the Trialist Empire’s large flock of deities had been built over a long history of following this route. In fact, some of the main pillars of our faith had originally been heretical gods.

Prior to the Empire’s founding, the Day God and Night Goddess ruled the pantheon native to this region. They moved their respective celestial bodies to rule over the concept of time.

When it came to our creation myth—all competing groups of deities claimed to have given shape to the world, though we would never know who was telling the truth—it posited that the world was originally in flux, with but a single god

that embodied all that was good.

God wandered the boundless expanse of idle sand that covered the planet for eons. A long eternity later, it came to the edge of the world—the threshold of nothingness. What awaited it was another god: the embodiment of all that was evil.

Polar opposites, the deities instantly recognized their incompatibility and attempted to end the other. They exchanged blows, strangled one another, and picked up wayside rocks with which to arm themselves. As time went on, they fashioned swords and spears to use in their feverish battle.

Their struggle continued for what we temporal beings would consider forever; to the powers above, it was no longer than the fluttering of an eyelid. Spilt blood, severed flesh, broken weapons, and the sparks that flew from their clashing blades colored the landscape with new divinity who would join the front line of battle.

Amidst their never-ending quarrel, the god of good and the god of evil had an epiphany: neither infallible good nor unerring evil could sustain the world alone. The two of them had yearned for one another all along.

Upon realizing their inseparable nature, the gods each dealt themselves a fatal wound, splitting their souls in two. Taking a half from each of the original beings, the Day God and Night Goddess were born; from two perfect yet isolated beings came the flawed harmony that gave birth to the world as we knew it.

Thus the Day God lit the midday sky with the warmth to cultivate food, only to torture those beneath Him with sweltering drought. And although the Night Goddess heralded the unbearable chill of dark, She brought a time of sleep and respite with Her.

While the cycle of life and death gave rise to the world full of Their children, some gods arising from the mythical battle had been blown to the far reaches of the planet. Distant kin forgot their origins and carved out a place for themselves as gods in their own right.

It followed that there were various sects and cults dotting the globe: they were lost lambs, ignorant of their true selves. Yet the Mother and Father never

forgot, and always accepted Their wayward children after a crusade; Her tender embrace and His unwavering hand were where they were meant to be.

Now that I'd neatly reorganized the whole thing with a cynical eye—knowing that things existed beyond this planet and all—it was clearly just less hassle to peacefully tweak conquered objects of worship to fit the greater values of a pantheon. Romans and Greeks had done the same. To uproot a faith entirely was a mountainous task, so reconciling heathen beliefs with the canon without an uprising was far more preferable.

"Impressive," Sir Feige said. "You're well learned."

"I'm delighted to please you, sir." I bowed at his undue praise.

"However," he said, lifting the accursed book with a furrowed brow, "what would you say if I told you there is a *fourth* possibility?"

Another one? I cocked my head in confusion. The treant turned his chair to the side and crossed his legs, staring off into space.

"There were gods who experienced a different fate. Those whom man had deemed unfit to be part of Creation and buried under the mortal hands of will."

I had trouble believing him, considering we lived in a world with observable higher beings, wherein those higher beings enjoyed verifiable authority over reality. For the sentient races to consign a heavenly power to the grave was a radical idea.

Of course, the fictional works of the twenty-first century had been full of god-slayers freeing the universe from divine grips. Some TRPGs had included stats for them to be bested in combat, giving rise to a favorite phrase modeled after a famous series with a garden full of sinners: *I'll kill God if the numbers say I can*.

But information-era Earth had seen a relative decline in the preeminence of religion; I would have never expected to hear a similar sentiment in a world so dominated by godly reverence.

I hadn't been familiar with every cultural tradition, so there was a chance I'd missed some counterexamples, but even the most cruel gods of ancient Earth had been punished only by their peers... At the very least, I'd never heard of a mythmaker so brazen as to suggest a pure-blooded human could judge the

heavens.

Tales of god-slayers existed, but they were either demigods themselves or chosen heroes equipped with the arms and blessings of competing deities. My original homeland had produced a tale of a mortal retribution for a god, but only with the caveat that the hero's ancestors had descended from the heavens themselves.

Even the infamous messiah who'd given his life to shoulder all the sins of humanity hadn't experienced a *true* death. His had been a part of the miracles he'd wrought, and even the final centurion had been a predestined part of salvation—far from the essence of deicide.

Although twenty-first-century fiction had reduced the heavens to no more than a final boss to be conquered, the denizens of more faithful eras balked at the hubris needed to claim superiority over the gods.

Yet here I was, in a world with real, *confirmed* deities whom we'd robbed of their names—of their very *being*. The weight of this action was unknowable.

An awful shiver ran down my spine, much like the one that had accompanied my first look at the tome. It bore only a passing resemblance to the pleasant tingle my cute childhood friend gave me and left a lingering discomfort that I couldn't shake off. Once again, I was faced with knowledge that threatened to rob me of the sanity needed to continue living in this world.

"Now that you know..." Sir Feige fiddled with the fate of the world with all the gravitas of someone turning over a pebble. "What price does your master name for this volume?"

Gods dammit, that monster in methuselah skin! One drachma to ferry this thing around?! I would've refused for double! Lady Agrippina had known exactly what awaited me, and I could already imagine her infuriatingly perfect smile as she laughed at my despair. *How the hell can you live with making someone deal with this sort of thing for fun?! Curse you!*

Despite just having taken a bath, I was frozen to my core. Sir Feige lifted the chilling item and turned to me, his face utterly grim.

[Tips] Among arcane tomes, there are many that have effects on any that view them—some even influence their surroundings just by existing. The College’s deepest book vaults are considered forbidden for good reason.

Staring at the obviously heinous tome, I could feel the armor of my sanity being whittled away, revealing an underlying urge to flee. I was well acquainted with tabletop systems that included confounded texts like these. The heroes of those games had been even frailer than *mensh*, and the scenarios they were made for littered with mental landmines that would ruin a psyche with one misstep. My dubiously helpful comrades and I had spent many an hour discussing whether we ought to pick up the occasional mind-rotting spell or one-trick wonder weapon.

While our tales in those worlds had been just as entertaining as any other, most had ended with exactly zero hope of salvation. Anything that resembled a happy end came with the asterisk of a mountain of NPC corpses.

Systems like those categorized mere death as a lucky fate, and the book in Sir Feige’s hand was surely the greater implied evil. It was pure bane, questioning the insolence of those who’d sought to surmount the gods.

I didn’t know where it originally came from, or if it involved outer gods from beyond our realm, but I was positive nothing good would come of it. At best it would annihilate a person’s psyche, and at worst I could see it bringing our very world to its knees.

It went without saying that the apocalypse would be an inconvenient development, but I’d also personally experienced the frustration of having my character sheet confiscated to walk back into the scene as an NPC. I hardly wanted to look at the damned book, let alone involve myself with it; Lady Agrippina wanted me to *take it home*? Please, this is no time for jokes.

“Hm... A tad too provocative for a young soul.”

Sir Feige did me the favor of shutting the dread thing away. My oppressive desire to flee the scene released me as soon as it left my view. Either the book’s power wasn’t actually all that notable, or the desk was a special containment unit. Of course, classic story beats demanded the truth be the latter.

“Now then,” he resumed, “what price has your master named in exchange for this tome?”

My heart throbbed to the point of pain, but I threw myself into negotiations. I took a few deep breaths, desperately recollecting my frayed thoughts. The horrid sensation of having my brain sanded down refused to leave me, but I needed to power through for Elisa’s future.

Get a hold of yourself. Stop trembling, and don’t let your spirit crumble. Who do you think you are? You’re the cool brother that’s going to save the day, aren’t you?

I reminded myself of my inalienable purpose, dragging up my sunken spirits to ready myself for a round of bartering. As with purpose, bargaining also revolved around the nonnegotiable values that bookended a deal. If the other party’s offer was far from my absolute maximum, I could just let things ride out, but I would need to push back if the final price veered too close to my upper limit. Keeping this one detail in mind was the key to successful negotiation.

However, there was a slight—nay, a gargantuan problem with this line of thinking: my client had told me to buy the item for “whatever the asking price may be.” Sure, I’d wished for my corporate overlords of the past to give me a budget with more leeway, but not *this* much.

Lady Agrippina making that offer in person would have been fine. Trusting the seller’s discretion with a blank check was a bold move, but she was the one supplying the money. But when all of the decision-making laid with me, it suddenly turned into a test of my business acumen.

Turning off the lights upstairs and blurting out, “Whatever price you ask for!” would be all too easy. Yet that would reduce this to a literal child’s errand. The GM was sure to scribble down a neutered experience number on my character sheet with a disappointed grimace, if he bothered giving me any at all.

I couldn’t throw my smarts out the window just because I’d been given the freedom to do as I pleased. With my authority came the expectation of equal effort.

Thus, I readied myself to give Lady Agrippina a real shock. The methuselah topped my People I Want to Get Even With list, and exceeding her expectations

was a sure sign that I was growing closer to my goals—and with them, my independence.

“We are prepared to offer equitable compensation in return for the good,” I said. “Whether it be money or alternative payment, we are ready to meet any needs you may have.”

“Hm...”

Giving someone a blank check invariably encouraged them to add extra zeros on the end of whatever price they initially thought was fair. The move here was to first goad Sir Feige into giving me an estimate of what he valued the book at. I could accept a fair price on the spot, and anything unreasonably high would still make for a foothold I could use in our discussion.

What was more, he was the one in the seller’s seat, not me. As a buyer, I had the privilege of asking what it would take for him to part with it. Any attempt to put the onus back on me implied he didn’t value it very highly, and I could justify offering a low price.

“Frankly,” he said, “I’d be fine with using the blasted thing to fuel a fireplace. The book bored me even more than the other rarities coming through my doors, and I have no interest in an account of a god the clergymen of ancient times considered blasphemous. My devotion to the gods of *today* doesn’t amount to much, anyhow.”

The treant snapped his fingers, causing a chair to float up from the corner of the room. Apparently, he employed Unseen Hands for common chores too. The chair came down in the middle of the room, signaling that he was ready for a proper discussion.

“Take a seat. You seem drained.”

“Thank you kindly.” Sitting in the presence of a nobleman was improper, but so was refusing his hospitality. My legs were still trembling no matter how much energy I tried to muster, so I took him up on his offer.

Sir Feige nodded, seemingly pleased with how I hadn’t put up a front. He continued, “Most importantly, nothing about the book sits right with me. I’ll admit that some of the rhetorical devices piqued a tiny bit of literary interest,

but I can't understand why anyone would want to dive deeper into such appalling history. Not only that, but the original buyer was so obnoxious about the make of its bindings that we'd been a hair's breadth away from all-out battle before I canceled his accounts and sent him away."

I couldn't help but feel like I'd heard something incredibly unpalatable. I had a sinking feeling that the make involved resources of human origin: the cosmic horror settings I knew of tossed around long pig dust jackets like they were A4 sheets of paper, after all...

From Sir Feige's wording, I surmised that he hadn't used such materials to craft the black book of terror he'd shown me, but who was to say what the original had been like? Just thinking about it gave me the jitters.

The concepts I was dealing with were undoubtedly fantasy, but my wish had been for gleaming, heroic dreams, not the dealings of Kadath and Yuggoth. I very much would have preferred if my encounters didn't skirt the dividing line between these subgenres.

"With all that said, let me make you a deal," Sir Feige said. "I don't want to negotiate with your master...but with *you*. What do you say?"

My mind was still stuck in a slog of unhappy realities, so it took me a moment to process his proposal. I logically knew what he'd said: he was willing to trade the book not for a monetary sum supplied by Lady Agrippina, but for something that I could produce. Since I would be completing my task either way, it had no real bearing on my quest. Still, that meant his interest in me outweighed the deep pockets of an active magus in his mind.

"From what I can see, you have quite the intriguing...*presence* about you."

"Ah... Yes, I suppose." He wasn't wrong. A black and green elf each and an irredeemably demented wraith haunted my being.

"I happen to love stories from young travelers like you. I might not have had the talent to write my own tales, but hearing those of others will never get old."

The treant's love of his hobby was painfully evident from the overflowing bookshelves littering the room. There were more legends of slain dragons than I could count, and sensual romances lined up beside them. Anthologies of

tragedies befalling young leads were placed at convenient heights too; it was fairly easy to get a grasp of the man's taste.

"And so," he said, "I'd like to send you on a little adventure."

"What?" I said, perplexed. "An adventure?"

"You heard me right," he said with a meaningful nod.

Sir Feige pulled out a map of the local area. The precise topographical lines that outlined the contour of the region meant this chart had to be some kind of military secret. He'd opened it up without any fanfare, but in a foreign land, this diagram of the middle of nowhere would be worth a small mountain of the largest coins in circulation—the kind that only big merchants and state diplomats used.

"Well, when you get to my standing, these sorts of things find their way to you."

He spoke playfully, but this wasn't a laughing matter. Capital punishment would be a *light* sentence if this ever fell into foreign hands. Casually making a copy for personal use was absolutely not okay, but the scrivener didn't seem to notice my trembling as he pointed his branchy finger to a forest north of Wustrow.

"These woods don't have much in them, save for an occasional bear."

Uh, that's pretty major. Bears were less dangerous than demibeasts and the like, but they could still manhandle a person. Forget crossbow bolts, the things could shrug off 5.56mm rounds to the dome; facing one armed with a stick of sharpened metal was a bloodcurdling idea. I preferred my odds of downing a tank with a single molotov cocktail.

"It's about a day's walk," he said.

"...A long way on a child's legs," I said.

"Hah, but no challenge to the sort of boy to be sent all this way on his master's order, I'm sure?"

I didn't have any real counterpoint, so the conversation carried on. Had my subconscious recognition of the bandits as a wandering encounter caused a

climax to spawn for this session? I know there are certain plot beats you've got to hit, but wasn't this a bit too soon?

"You see," he went on, "an eccentric adventurer built a hideaway in these woods, but..."

"But there hasn't been any word from him?"

"That's right. I remember hearing he'd moved in a while before I left for the capital, so I'm sure he either left or died long ago."

Sir Feige seemed rather nonchalant about all this, but how long ago was he talking about? Personally, it felt like a past so distant that thinking about it would overwhelm my mensch senses. I hadn't ever come across any estimates for treant life spans, but that couldn't be because no one had ever seen one die...right?

"At any rate," he said, "I want you to go there and find me a certain book."

Despite calling it a "book," what Sir Feige wanted wasn't a shady tome or rare historical account. To begin with, something of the sort would have never piqued this man's interest; had he been the type to enjoy such things, he would still be servicing long lines of aristocrats in the capital.

He wanted the diary he was sure the late adventurer had kept. The fellow had made quite a name for himself in Sir Feige's youth, and was famed for keeping a detailed log of all his journeys.

"And if that journal is still there," the treant said with a weighty pause, "wouldn't that make your heart dance?"

"Well..." It seemed I had a great deal in common with this woody gentleman. "Yes, it certainly would."

Come on, it sounded like so much fun. The diary of a notorious adventurer was basically a TRPG player's replay. No fan of both adventure and tabletop games could ever hope to contain their excitement in a situation like this.

"Personally," Sir Feige said, "I will be happy if you bring me the diary. If it isn't there, I would also be content with hearing the tale of your own journey."

Basically, he wanted to say that there was no reason not to try. I wasn't about

to refuse or anything, but couldn't help but wonder why all the long-lived beings of this world were so adamant on using the rushed lives of mensch as story fodder.

Of course, this gentleman's tasteful quest was so thoroughly reasonable that it would be an offense to compare his interests to the debauchery I'd already witnessed. Taking a trip to the woods was far, *far* more agreeable than having my sister taken hostage for household chores or engaging in a barely consensual cosplay event.

"Besides," he added, "in any event, I can't let go of this bedeviled book without preparing it for travel."

I felt like Sir Feige had seen through my eagerness as he anxiously stroked his mossy beard. I definitely didn't want to touch that cursed tome with my bare hands, and haphazardly throwing it into a knapsack felt like playing with fire. The offer to ready some means of containment was a very welcome one.

"It will take two or three days for this hollowed-out old log to get everything together without my workshop and connections. Think of this as a way to kill some time."

While his quest was a tad hazardous for an idle amusement, the occasional bear could be avoided with proper precautions. If the adventurer had lived in some ancient ruin, I would gear up and call my fey friends to prepare for a full session of hacking and slashing, but a residence in the woods' shallow reaches was perfect for a subquest.

"But if going out is too much of a bother, I'll sell you the book for twenty-five drachmae."

Twenty-five drachmae... That was as much as the large gold coins that merchants used for dealings between companies, and would take an average farming household five years of starvation and tax evasion to earn. To use that money on a single book was luxury itself. Elisa could pay for room, board, and tuition for a full year and then some with that kind of cash.

"I don't intend to take more than the cost of production. I've been meaning to use this drawer for something else, anyhow."

I nearly fell out of my chair. *Hold on, it took twenty-five drachmae to make the thing? What the hell is it made from?!*

If my earlier hypothesis refuting the possibility of “manmade” materials was correct, then that only made me *more* concerned as to how the book had been crafted. Was I going to be okay? Leaving all the cosmic mumbo jumbo aside, I felt like the gods would smite me for daring to touch the thing with my dirty plebeian hands.

Seeing me and my rural values thrown into disarray made Sir Feige chuckle, his majestic shoulders bouncing up and down. Why did every single surprise have to come with two or three friends hidden just out of view?

[Tips] Adventurers regularly demand extra pay from their employers to account for various complications encountered on any given job. Those who roll dice for these drifters seem to feel no remorse even when negotiations turn to bloodshed.

After receiving a much more adventure-like quest than my original cursed errand, I headed back to the inn under the veil of night. I entered the motel still dazed from the attack on my fiscal values to find that my travel buddy had already dozed off.

I’d forgotten all about the (approximate) taste of home he’d had, and how he’d told me he was going to bed. We’d been cutting corners on travel expenses—he had been as eager to earn an extra dime as I’d been—so his first night in a bed in days was sure to blend with our meal for a wonderful dream.

Inviting him along for this woodland adventure would have to wait for morning. We weren’t in a rush; I saw no need to wake him up.

Getting to my own bed, I noticed that Mika had already cast Clean on it. Magic was a wonderful way of ridding bedding of pesky lice and fleas, though it admittedly did nothing to thicken the paltry sheets. Regardless, it was orders of magnitude better than sleeping on the ground.

I silently thanked my thoughtful friend and opened the covers. As an aside, his hair looked comparable in health to mine, even though I’d taken a bath earlier

in the day. He'd warned me not to tell any women about my neglected follicular health, but he was no less a scoundrel on this front.

Thin as my blanket was, a long day of travel, a nice warm bath, and post-combat fatigue made my mattress feel like the clouds dotting the heavens. I didn't have any pajamas—which were only a thing in certain upper class circles anyway—so I crawled into bed in my travel clothes and instantly clocked out.

I slept so soundly that I didn't even dream, but out of the blue, a strange discomfort grabbed hold of me. My ego slowly drifted from sleep to wakefulness, and in a surreal state of half awareness, I realized the source of my annoyance came from my lower half. I knew this feeling all too well...I'd wet the bed.

This was rather embarrassing to admit, but from the time I'd awoken in this body at age five, it had taken me a whole two years to get over my bed-wetting troubles. This had little to do with my habits, as I'd made an effort to take care of my needs and refuse water at night; I couldn't have done anything about the physical state of my bladder.

I hurriedly sat up and the dismayingly familiar cold dampness made itself known downstairs.

"Gods, I know I made fun of you today, but isn't this a bit much?"

Perhaps this was my punishment for mocking the divine in a world where they were active participants. I shed a single tear at how unfathomably petty their retribution was.

Alternatively, this could have been caused by the lingering stress I'd taken on from seeing the traumatic tome and listening to an uncalled-for cosmological history lecture. Whatever the case, the shame made me want to go dig a grave for myself—I was physically thirteen, and this was just a miserable state of affairs.

I eyed the other bed anxiously to find that Mika was not there. His belongings had been left behind, so I took it that *he'd* managed to get up in time. Lucky him.

At any rate, I needed to clean up after myself. I slipped out of bed, using my

incomplete mana reserves to cast Clean on the bed—which hadn't been stained, but this was a matter of principle—and taking off my soiled pants.

The first order of business was—*hm? Oh... I see.*

After undressing myself, I realized that my blunder had been of a different variety. As tasteless as the comparison was, had I been a girl, this incident would have introduced me to a whole new realm of hygiene products.

“Ah... Well, I guess I *am* thirteen now. Shouldn't be a surprise...”

It seemed I was even more pathetic than I'd thought...but I supposed this sort of bed-wetting was also in the cards in the wake of life-threatening danger.

Having gone through the ropes of reaching male adulthood once before, I had a solid grasp of this side of life in both theory and practice. However, such urges got in the way of other endeavors, and I hadn't bothered proactively pursuing them when I'd reincarnated in a prepubescent body.

Of course, some of the skills and traits available to me had been the likes found only in erogé, and I recognized the fact that I might one day waste resources on them. Still, without the physical drivers needed to pull me in, I'd been perfectly content to ignore fleshly pleasures. The mind was, without exception, tied to the body that housed it.

All that said, this was just pitiful. I couldn't remember having any dreams of the sort, so this was the result of my own failed management. *I'm such a moron.*

Even worse, I could hardly bear the thought of repeating my teenage years, so swayed by hormonal impulses. Having to endure the idiocy of youth for a second time was nothing to look forward to.

My first time around had been full of stupid episodes: attempting five shots in succession, spending my limited funds on worthless things—I could go on at length outlining my ill-advised efforts in pursuit of Cool Guy status. No one in this world knew of my dark past, but it clung to my brain with an unshakable grip. I swore to not repeat my mistakes again.

Anyway, that was enough negativity; there were some positives to this situation. This was observable proof of my hormonal shift, meaning my body

would soon begin to grow into the strength of an adult man; I'd be ready to sell my might as a proper adventurer.

I got myself together and headed out to the well behind our inn to get clean before Mika returned. Naturally, I'd cast Clean on myself, but the feeling of filth was far from gone. I wouldn't dare to question the almighty Clean after using it for months, but there was something to be said about the psychological effects of real washing.

Concealing my presence, I made my way to the backyard. The penniless used the well here to wash themselves, so it was sandwiched between the inn, the outer wall, and a grove of trees for privacy's sake.

There, I stumbled across something that truly caught me off guard: my friend, bathing. Quite some time ago, he'd explained that he wasn't fond of sharing baths with other people; perhaps that was why he'd gone through the trouble of magically boiling well water just to clean himself at night.

I opened my mouth to greet him...only to stop in disbelief. He was missing some anatomy I'd expected—but not in the classic, “You were a girl?!” way that I'd mused about so long ago.

Mika didn't have *anything*. The concepts of man and woman were distinctions derived mainly from the one organ that Mika completely lacked. Shimmering moonlight lit his snow-white body: the contour of his featureless chest continued unbroken to his lower half.

Mika didn't have anything: the reproductive features that life as we knew it took for granted were simply absent. Yet his form was far from disturbing; under the lunar spotlight, he was more akin to some chaste figure carved from marble, standing confidently in a museum hall long after doors closed for the day. He needed not another's praise, nor did he pride himself for his appearance—his very being laid bare that beauty existed all for its own sake...

“Who's there?!”

Oops.

I'd made sure to minimize my presence, but hadn't expected anyone to be at the well. I'd marched right into the grove without any pretense of stealth—a

fact I only realized when Mika shouted at me. He'd been washing his hair, but spotted me instantly after he rinsed off and looked up.

"E-Erich?"

Mika's vicious glare shifted into a distressed frown as soon as he realized the voyeur he'd imagined was me. His wretched expression was exactly that of someone who had something to hide.



“Mika...”

“Wait, no, wait! Erich, you’re wrong, I’m—I’m not—”

“You...” *Oh, of course. Mika, my friend, how could I not see?* “You’re an angel.”

“...What?” My candid opinion was met with an expression that I had never, ever seen before.

[Tips] “Angels” in this world refer to a specific race far to the west of Rhine who devote themselves to a one-true-god. Few in the Trialist Empire are aware of their existence, and divine messengers are referred to as apostles or heavenly kinsmen instead. These messengers are lowly gods whose visits to the mortal realm are only temporary.

Our awkward scene came to a close when Mika sneezed at a chilly autumn breeze. I convinced him to dress himself and we headed back inside, each sitting on our own beds. The air between us was...*strained*.

Look, I know, I *know*, but come on! Can anyone really fault me for having remembered the Abrahamic traditions of Earth?!

The silence took on the weight of lead, threatening to crush us under the pressure. At long last, Mika spoke, eyes still fixed on the floor.

“My clan comes from the northernmost lands.”

His lineage’s tale was a heavy one. They’d lived for generations on an island right beside the planet’s pole known as Nifleyja. The name meant “the gloomy isle” in an ancient tongue, and life there always got by on the slimmest of margins.

Winter robbed the land of sunlight, and the abundant rays of summer ironically made agriculture an impossibility. Yet in these remote reaches outside the Harvest Goddess’s sphere, life had taken its hold.

Alas, the extreme conditions meant that any minor shift in the environment spelled death. An extended lack of fish quickly starved fisherfolk, and an

outbreak of disease among what little sheep could be kept snapped whole families faster than a wilting flower. And even an island as treasureless as theirs was raided by pirates from the northern archipelago.

Only a handful of specialized demihumans and humanfolk could withstand the harsh environment. Selchies endured the frigid oceans' churn with their seal-like coats and blubber. Callistoi in this region were better adapted to the cold than their cousins, who'd taken after woodland bears in the eastern half of our continent's western reach, but retained their powerful builds. It was plain to see that these peoples were supremely suited for life in the bitter icelands, and they had the might to fight off invaders.

Much like the others, mensch had also evolved to make use of their greatest strength in order to scrape by in the arctic environment. These humanfolk had overcome the catastrophic flaw in our excellent reproductive capabilities: an imbalanced ratio of males to females could decimate a population in just one generation.

"I'm...a tivisco," Mika spat, utterly ashamed of his heritage.

Described as mensch who blurred the line between sexes, one might first suspect them to be hermaphroditic. However, their version of duality involved a shift from one sex to another.

Mensch spawned at an astonishing rate, but the wintery deserts of the north spat in the face of our racial specialty. Evolved to patch up the holes in population caused by the lopsided deaths of either men or women, tivisco were totally asexual until sexual maturity.

Once their bodies were fully developed, they morphed into one of the two sexes at regular intervals. They spent one moon genderless and then gained a set of reproductive organs; a month later they returned to their neuter state, and after another they shifted to the opposite sex from their last cycle. In the event that their population skewed, individuals could consciously override their oscillating cycle to repeat a sex after a fallow month.

This sexual fluidity allowed tivisco to maintain a balanced population at all times to make constant use of mensckind's greatest evolutionary advantage.

I found the whole affair remarkably effective. Apparently, mothers retained

their feminine features for a short while following childbirth—until the baby was weaned—and fathers did the same, putting on characteristically masculine muscle to guard the flock. Had their distinguishing features not required such harsh conditions to arise, I could have seen them becoming the dominant humanfolk on the mainland.

“I...I didn’t mean to trick you...”

Unfortunately, the mensch of the Empire had not given their kind a warm welcome.

Mika’s clan had moved to the Trialist Empire three generations ago, no longer able to bear the constant threat of cold and violence—a lesson that survival alone was insufficient. Imperial citizens were used to immigrants, and the tivisco had clung to the hope that the national acceptance of foreign peoples would offer them safe haven as they began the long trek south.

Yet they were *too* similar. The local mensch failed to see them as exotic travelers seeking a new home: mankind feared the unknown, to be sure, but that which bore an uncanny resemblance to the familiar was exponentially more frightful. Between the never-ending source of trouble I worked for and the fashion-loving vitality glorifier I sometimes indulged, I was far more disturbed by the latter, as it terrified me to think that a former mensch could be so degenerate.

This knee-jerk uncanny reaction forced the tivisco to remain on the fringes of society. While the imperial people were not so unaccepting as to totally ostracize them, they hesitated before greeting a tivisco in the street. They lived as perpetual foreigners, unable to truly enjoy a festival day.

Mika came to the College’s doorstep determined to clear the tivisco name. If he returned to his ancestral homeland as an oikodomurge capable of making the whole region habitable, no one would ever deride his people again.

His parents worked like mad to scrape together the funds to send him to his local magistrate’s school, where he studied with similar desperation to catch his teachers’ eyes. Combined with the task of currying favor with his magistrate, there was no doubt he’d put in effort incomparable to the average aspiring magus. How much willpower had it taken for him to approach those castle

doors?

“I knew... I knew I needed to tell you at some point, but... I just...” Mika’s choking voice wavered. Moonlight spilling in from the window shone on a glistening tear trapped on his long lashes. “I didn’t want you to hate me.”

Wringing out the words, my friend told me the tale of his first attempt at friendship.

Initially, Mika had thought the new environment of the College would be altogether different, and had honestly explained his origins to his fellow First Light students.

They’d found Mika interesting and trampled past his personal boundaries in an attempt to understand him better. Tragically, their overzealous curiosity had turned them into people that he could no longer want to call friends. In good ways and bad, children of our age were naive.

As young scholars, they were pursuers of knowledge unable to suppress their curiosity for the unknown. They didn’t know that people held secrets meant to stay forever buried, and the cruelty born from that innocence was the crux of Mika’s sad story.

Following that incident, he refrained from socializing with his intra-cadre peers, devoting himself entirely to the lonesome act of study.

Yet in a stroke of luck, I had appeared: an indentured servant without relations to the aforementioned students. *Perhaps*, he’d thought, *I can actually get along with him*. His refreshing demeanor hadn’t been natural, but a concerted effort to become friends with me.

Mika had hidden the circumstances of his birth and acted the part of an average mensch boy, but he’d meant to tell me the truth eventually. Yet every time he tried to muster the will to do so, the memories of his hometown and the classroom nipped at his heels.

“I just... I didn’t want my first friend—I didn’t want *you* to hate me. I didn’t want you to look at me like some sideshow attraction either. When I imagined that, I couldn’t bring myself to say it...”

Blurted between sobs, Mika’s confession took on the colors of penitence. For

him, his ancestry had become a sin in and of itself—one that had reared its ugly head to ruin the fun of his first long journey with a friend.

I could not imagine how deep this emotional wound reached. For better or for worse, I was and had been an ordinary man. In my past life, the only major issue I'd faced had been my early demise, and the entirety of my new life had been spent in a familiar mensch shell.

There was no way for me to truly comprehend his pain, and even claiming otherwise was morally reprehensible. In a world painted with colorful arrays of peoples that were so close, yet so far, I could think of no greater crime than for an outsider to don the veil of empathy without the cultural heritage to substantiate it. I'd come from a species that had warred among itself; how could I claim to understand another?

I wouldn't console Mika with cheap words—I *couldn't*. I refused to heinously make light of his lifelong struggle by turning it into an easily digestible topic.

"Huh?"

So I said nothing as I embraced my friend. I took him into my arms to stop him from wounding his own heart any further with the daggered words spilling from his lips.

[Tips] Tivisco are a humanfolk race native the extreme regions of the northern pole. Their default form is that of their mensch relatives missing reproductive organs, and they transform monthly to one of two sexes. During this period, their physiognomies are indistinguishable from standard mensch save for a two-day period in which their organs and skeletal structures rearrange themselves. Adolescents remain wholly neuter until puberty, generally observed somewhere between the ages of thirteen to fifteen.

Their striking resemblance to mensch paired with their short history in the Empire has caused the average imperial citizen to regard them as outsiders.

Pressure was a vital part of stemming bleeding in medical emergencies, and I believed the same principle applied in terms of emotional wounds.

When times were tough, there was nothing in the world that soothed me more than a good hug. In my past life, my parents and sister had doted on me in childhood; my parents in Konigstuhl had done the same. When I passed on the gentle embrace to Elisa, she always stopped crying, just as I had once done. I was sure that the warmth of another was the ultimate bandage for a cut on the soul.

“...Erich?”

I kept Mika close and said what needed to be said. I had to show him that this warmth would remain steadfast no matter what happened.

“Mika, who are you?” I asked.

“What?”

“Who are you, Mika?” I repeated. “A student at the Imperial College? A tivisco immigrant?”

In the same vein, the ultimate question hovered between the lines: did his race, or the gender that his situation hid, affect our friendship?

I didn’t think so. I acknowledged that it was an important part of him: much in the same way that I would soon change from boy to man, he would begin taking on masculine and feminine characteristics depending on his transformative cycle.

However, Mika remained Mika regardless of how he changed. The *self* that governed the body would not yield, and I knew he would stay the same friend that I’d shared the joys of childhood with.

“You’re all of those things and more, Mika. You’re *you*, no matter the details... You’re my beloved friend—my *best* friend. Am I wrong?”

Perhaps his personality would shift with his body, but at his crux, he would remain the same. And I’d become friends with him because I’d wanted to be close to the person he was.

I let go of him for a moment and looked straight into his eyes. He was in a state of shock, unable to process the swirling emotions inside of him.

“I *chose* to be your friend because you were a joy to be with. I invited you

along because it was fun to spend time with you. If I considered you a superficial acquaintance, I would've come here alone."

While solo journeys were rife with inconvenience, I was not the type to invite someone I wasn't even fond of on a long expedition, nor was I philanthropic enough to share a bedroom with them. Most of all, I liked to think I wasn't careless enough to camp in the great outdoors with someone I couldn't trust.

I'd brought Mika along because I had faith in him—because I knew to share this adventure together would be *fun*. I grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed my nose into his; a blink would brush my lashes across his.

"Am I alone? Why did you join me? Why did you fight at my side? Am I some nominal friend, only here to fill the void of your loneliness? Or maybe I'm just a nameless mensch to take advantage of, and the person *Erich* doesn't exist to you?"

Mika's teary eyes blinked once and he pleaded, in a hoarse voice, "No, Erich! Anything but that!"

With another blink, he let his tears fall away to return my gaze. Swallowing back the urge to cry, he at last gave verbal form to his resolution.

"I think of you as a friend too. At first, it was because I thought it'd be easier to talk to someone new to the area, but not anymore... I'm not scared of losing a friend—I'm scared of losing *you*."

Mika's limp body suddenly reanimated as his hands clasped over my shoulders. His hands grabbed onto me with force, as if in an attempt to convince me of his sincerity.

"I know, Mika," I said. "What am I to you?"

"...A friend, Erich," came his response. "*My* friend."

"That's right, old chum. And isn't that enough?"

Both he and I held great respect for the other's stature. However, not once had I ever thought of his future success as a magus before thinking of him as a person; I was sure that my connections to powerful researchers and professors was of little importance to him as well.

“We’re *friends*, Mika. Bound in all but blood.”

“Oh, thank you, Erich... Thank you...”

“Friendship isn’t something to be thanked for, old chum.”

“I know. But still...thank you, old pal.”

I hugged my sobbing friend once more and gently patted him on the back. My sister had taught me that this was the best way to soothe a weary soul. Although my body creaked at his iron embrace, it didn’t matter; I kept my hand moving until he was sound asleep.

[Tips] The imperial mantra of solidarity with and tolerance for foreign races has roots in Rhine’s bloody history. Centuries of fighting to establish and protect the country shoulder to shoulder with the alien peoples that the Empire swallowed whole made them develop the camaraderie needed to transform a state of scattered cultures into a nation-state. Any band of people with the collective will to integrate is certain to find itself a true part of the Empire with time.

I awoke in the morning after our melodramatic moment to great embarrassment. This was not the first time I’d buried my face in a pillow out of shame: whenever I got *too* in character, listening to recordings of my sessions filled me with dread. Hot blood and pure hearts couldn’t wash away the cringe that lingered after what was basically a confession of historic proportions...

“Good morning, old pal,” Mika said.

...And that was all the more true when I shared a room with the person in question.

“Yeah, good morning,” I said back. “Hey, Mika... Uh, about yesterday...”

Delayed as it was, I was incredibly embarrassed. This reaffirmed to me that the humors of night never brought about anything decent. A lifetime ago, most of the scenarios I’d penned past sundown had gone straight to the garbage bin when I’d reread them in the morning—come to think of it, that had applied to workplace documents too.

Everything I'd said to Mika came from the bottom of my heart, but, I mean, *come on! What was that?! I'm a grown adult inside! There had to be a better way of putting it!*

"Say no more, cherished comrade," Mika said. "I understand. Nothing would make me happier than to hear those words again, but they aren't something to throw around so lightly, are they?"

Uh... Mika misinterpreted my concerns in a strange way. I felt like his thought patterns had, at some point, taken a turn for the theatrical. Our verbal game of role-playing the characters of a saga was fine, but I for one didn't have the acting chops to touch on our nighttime conversation without breaking my cool facade. At this point I had no doubt he'd turn into the sort of player who'd nonchalantly steal hearts with romantic turns of phrase.

"Come on, breakfast awaits," Mika said, leading me by the hand.

As close as we'd been up until this point, Mika's step was half a step closer than usual as we walked to the same restaurant we'd visited last evening. I was surprised to see the place so lifeless, but we'd woken up rather late. With how simple imperial breakfasts tended to be—many chose to have nothing but tea and cheese—it was only natural for an eatery to be empty.

The same waitress with the beaming smile and freckles brought us our breakfast for five assarii each: one cut of black bread, a fat white wurst, some small dairy items, and an apricot. It was a respectable portion for what we paid.

We spent an extra couple of assarii for a pot of red tea to share—though this was made with roasted dandelions instead of chicory—and took our time enjoying our peaceful meal. Fall was a busy season for merchants, and none of them had the time to stick around and disturb us late wakers.

"Oh," I said. "By the way, Mika, I have a little proposition for you."

"Hm? What is it, o esteemed friend? Ask away: at this point, I'd be happy even to share a tub with you, old pal."

Then let's—wait, that's not the point! Mika was so over the moon that I wanted someone to immortalize his blissful smile in a portrait, but I had to keep his joy in check in order to invite him on my journey to the woods.

“Hmm,” he mused. “The diary of an adventurer, huh?”

Mika took a bite of his sausage and chewed on both it and my proposal. Originally, our job had been to come to this town for one drachma; taking on extra work was his own decision. That said, I felt a bit guilty about asking him *now*, of all times...

“Sounds fun! I’ll tag along.”

Mika’s mood was so positively superb that I imagined he’d even entertain a request to see him naked again. When I tried to warn him about the possibility we’d run into a bear, he flashed me a gallant smile and said, “All the more reason I can’t let you run off by yourself.”

How long would it take for him to simmer down? However long it ended up taking, the responsibility was mine to think through anything I asked of him for the time being. Otherwise I risked encountering colorful events that would one day become dark, embarrassing memories—his, not mine, mind you. Even if it didn’t, I would never want to take advantage of him when he was so excited about our reaffirmed friendship.

I washed down my worries and the last of breakfast with a swig of tea. With our meal finished, we set out to prepare for our journey. That said, a day’s walk was mere hours on horseback; we’d come prepared to camp out for days on end, so all we needed was a little extra water and food.

“Hmm,” Mika murmured, “everything’s so pricey.”

“’Tis the season, after all,” I said.

The marketplace near the workmen’s district was chock-full of fresh produce and the distinctive merriment of autumn. However, the increased demand for goods always drove up prices around this time.

Merchant caravans with bodyguards and mercenaries in tow hopped from town to town, buying up packaged foods wherever they went. Common folk needed to procure nonperishables to weather the cold winter months, only adding to the number of buyers. The only exceptions to this need were farmers who could stock their own pantries and mages that could prevent rot (and the caravans that employed the latter).

The overwhelming demand meant that sellers could mark foodstuffs up and they'd still sell. Furthermore, this prevented hoarders from buying everything for themselves, so nearly every stall sold goods for two or three assarii more than what was standard.

"How much do we have left?" I asked.

"Uhh," Mika answered, "we'll need to set aside this much for the motel, and this much for the exit tax at the gates..."

"So that leaves us with...this much for food. Well, we *have* to get some jerky, right?"

"Personally, I don't think I can let go of dried apples and apricots, but they're looking a bit steep..."

The two of us counted the copper coins in our joint purse—we didn't plan on using the silver pieces anytime soon and had hidden them in our shoes—and discussed our budget. Then, the jenkin in charge of a nearby preserved food stall let out a massive sigh.

"S'ppose I can't let'a pair o' brats go hungr'n," he said. "C'm'ere, I'll cut'cha wee o' the top."

The man's thick northern dialect was appended by the sound of his chattering front teeth. His intonation was so far removed from palatial speech and what I'd heard in the southern parts of the Empire that I couldn't quite catch all he'd said. Still, it was clear that he was taking pity on us after seeing our empty wallet.

"Aye, fer truly?!"

However, the real surprise was seeing my friend fluently respond in the exact same tongue.

"Wee, y'hear?" the shopkeeper said. "Nurly a tad. Can't do naught's 'bout'cha if y'don't have the cash."

"Thank y'kindly!"

"Go on, go on, take w'e'er ya need."

They eloquently went back and forth, and Mika ended up buying the goods at

no more than standard price. His usual speech never strayed from the male standard of palatial dialects, but it made perfect sense for him to be a master of northern accents. Sir Feige had easily switched between the two as well, and my old coworkers from western Japan had sounded completely different when we'd gone out to drink.

I watched Mika intently as he jovially took the bag full of dried rations. Noticing my gaze, he suddenly blushed and hid himself behind the groceries.

"Uh, um, I mean, I used to talk like this before I learned the palatial tongue, so... Is it really that weird?"

Seeing him so bashful at his unique way of speaking was, well...cute. Alas, I truly must have been a self-indulgent man for these sorts of thoughts to come forth the instant I recognized him as not wholly sharing my gender. Er, well, I'd already danced with similar thoughts prior to this point, but the current lack of stops in my brain were giving me a fair bit of pause.

"No," I said, "I'm always impressed when I hear people speaking in ways I'm not used to."

"Impressed? Really?"

"Yeah, you're incredible. You two were practically using a foreign language to me."

Modern Rhinian was, for the most part, an easy language to learn once one had a solid command of its grammar. It wasn't a complicated tonal language by any means, as evidenced by the skill tree: acquiring the palatial tongue had taken quite a bit, but the foundational parts were all dirt cheap.

On the other hand, the sub-branches on my character sheet offering to let me learn regional dialects all went for whistle-inducing costs. The Trialist Empire had once been a smattering of unrelated nations inhabited by all kinds of cultures, after all. Local communities often employed peculiar figures of speech and perpetuated the use of all kinds of words that the general populace considered archaic.

Therefore, without studying the vernacular itself, these so-called dialects could sound very much like exotic languages. I'd encountered something similar

in Japan: whether they came from the northeast or the southwest, people with heavy accents had been nigh unintelligible to me. Learning to decipher their words later in life had been like interpreting a foreign language that just so happened to follow the same grammar rules as my own.

“Northern dialects *do* have a ton of archaisms,” Mika noted. “I can understand Ancient Northern and the archipelagic languages too, and all three share a ton of vocabulary. There are a few differences in spelling, and the emphasis rests on different syllables, but you can mostly hold a conversation between all three languages. Weird, huh?”

“Interesting, I’d say. I’m sure a trip to the far north would be a breeze with you by my side.”

My linguistically gifted companion and I continued strolling around the rural streets, but my mind drifted further north. Truth be told, I knew nothing about the lands beyond the Empire. All I’d learned about this world had come from the Konigstuhl church, explanations from the adults in my life, and the historic tales that poets sung.

The Konigstuhl church was obviously never meant to keep impartial records on foreign countries, so all of the accounts in its library had been from the Empire’s point of view. While they’d been far less partisan than I’d expected them to be, they remained markedly biased to imperial activity and only mentioned other states on the scarce occasions that they were relevant to domestic history. The College’s vault likely had better material, but I spent all of my time in that library studying magic, leaving me with no time to dedicate to the humanities.

However, perhaps that was fine. Exploring a land I hadn’t even read of before with nothing but my blade and my wits was sure to make for a riveting tale. Diving into a new setting without reading through its mechanics was risky, but always incredibly fun. Surely, a trip like that would make me exclaim, *This is what it means to adventure!*

“Then let’s go together sometime,” Mika said. “I know a bunch of beautiful places. You can walk across the northern sea in the winter, and the auroras shimmering in the sky will steal your breath away. Oh, and there’s this massive

waterfall that freezes solid—it's a bit far from my homeland, but that one's a treat. I think everyone should go see it at least once in their life."

Mika happily listed off the marvels of the north. They say that locals never visit their own landmarks, but it appeared he'd made the time to check them all out. As he gave form to his nostalgia, I could see a hint of pride leaking through in his expression.

"Those all sound like beautiful places," I said. "I'd love to see them."

Despite how pained he'd been while talking about his heritage, it was clear that he loved it. Why else would he want to make a name for himself just to win honors for his parents' place of birth? If he didn't love his family's history, he would just bring them all to the capital after earning the title of magus.

"Then...I'll take you to my hometown one day, Erich. Even though it's just ice and snow—oh, plus the sheep and reindeer."

"I'm looking forward to it."

We each gave our word for a distant promise: that we'd explore the northern reaches together, and that when we did, he would restore his homeland to glory. And the first step to seeing our oath through was to clean up the little adventure that lay ahead.

[Tips] Modern Rhinian arose as an artificial amalgamation of the tongues of the founding member states of the Empire.

"Woods" is a fairly broad term. Collections of trees can differ greatly in a variety of metrics, and it is hardly novel to expect one thing and find another. Maps may show the cartographical outline of where a forest begins and ends, but rarely ever involve the third dimension of *height*.

After hearing that our destination could contain bears, I'd prepared myself for a large thicket...but Sir Feige's request exceeded my every expectation.

"These are 'woods'?" Mika said in awe. "All I see is an endless ocean of trees."

"What a coincidence, old chum. I'm seeing the same thing."

The two of us stared at the forest, agape, to the point that my neck started hurting from looking up at the canopy. I was filled with dread at how plainly the impenetrable wall of trees refuted the idea of human entry.

This was not on the scale of a “little” adventure. These were the sort of deep woods an ancient witch would call home, only meant to be disturbed for a climactic fight or a request to craft long-lost medicines.

Hemlocks, firs, oaks—the forest was a chaotic mix of coniferous and deciduous, making it all the more alien to someone who’d only ever explored the woodlands of Berylin and Konigstuhl. Those well-kept groves were full of oaks and cypress used for woodworking; if they were posh schools for the gentry, then we were knocking on the door of a run-down juvenile detention center.

Here, wood grew freely until it decided on its own terms that it would stop, and the colossal roots breaching from the soil were well hidden beneath a thick carpet of fallen leaves. These trees did not lay out hospitality assuming that someone would come to care for them; they proactively warded off outsiders from entering.

Our quick little journey had turned into a labyrinthian open-air dungeon in no time flat. Had I lacked experience navigating wooded areas, I would have instantly turned around to hire a ranger or scout for safety’s sake. Every TRPG player knows that dungeon diving without a pathfinder is suicide.

Lightly armored, with a few days’ food in our bags, Mika and I felt like we’d been punched in the gut by the sheer magnitude of the woods—but that was no reason to stop. This sort of terrain might have significantly hampered the average party, but the same did not hold true for us.

As an oikodomurge-in-training, Mika was no stranger to dirt, rocks, and wood. Although he wasn’t tuned for harmony with all things natural like the priests who could commune with spirits, he was more than fit to cut open a path for us.

After a short preparation, he cast a cantrip—oikodomurges were better versed in hedge magic, as their work inherently demanded permanence—that made the soil pack itself into a shoulder-width walkway. The earthen serpent

advanced straight into the depths, graciously covering all the massive roots and bumps we might trip on.

“Sorry, this is the best I can do without using too much mana,” Mika said.

“What do you mean? This is incredible.”

The dirt path was perfectly level, and was easily traversable despite its slimness. Furthermore, its unerring straightness meant that we were sure to avoid the typical directional confusion that accompanied forest adventures. Neither graph paper nor bread crumbs would get a chance to shine on this trip.

“You think? Well, I didn’t want to mess up and harm the forest. Who knows how much trouble we’d get in if we did...”

I lightly slapped Mika on the shoulder to dispel his worries, and after a short pause, he slapped me back like always. Then, we started on his newly made path with the same close steps as usual.

Even at midday, the woods were dimly lit, and the lichens clinging to every tree contributed to a hair-raising atmosphere. However, the place itself was surprisingly peaceful. I didn’t know if we could chalk it up to a series of cooperative dice rolls, but we didn’t encounter any angry boars, bears, or bandits.

To be fair, leaving the animals aside, there wasn’t any reason to expect a group of ruffians to set up camp here. The people of this world lacked the gusto of the common mobs who popped up in every dungeon and volcano where the dice mandated their presence.

Who exactly would a hypothetical bandit camp even rob in this remote forest? Even if they wanted to exclusively prey on travelers while evading the eyes of imperial patrols, there were plenty of woodlands with foot traffic, closer to towns.

Unaccosted by the irrationality of random encounters, we sauntered through the serene forest, stopping to pick up the occasional useful item. The undisturbed old growth had left plenty of herbs that were worth a coin or two laying around, and the tough competition with the innumerable trees meant that only the finest plants survived. Herbs of this quality would go for a decent

sum.

“Look, Erich, acorns! Look at all of these!”

Mika collected a giant pile of acorns from the forest floor with a huge grin. He wasn't childishly playing around, mind you: acorns were a staple food his people had eaten for generations.

“We used to gather a ton of these in the fall to stock up for winter. If you crush them into a powder and add some water, they're not too shabby.” As he filled up his bag, he added, “I'll make some myself when we get home.”

Despite being a staple food in the north, denizens of the capital considered acorns to be pauper food meant to be fed to pigs, not people. Regardless, the mutton we'd eaten yesterday had opened the floodgates for Mika's desire for home cooking.

“If you extract the bitter parts, you can use it in bread and cookies, and you can steep it to make tea too. Personally, my favorite is when we slowly boil it into a paste, but I haven't seen it anywhere since I left for the south.”

Our walk went on much like this for a while, with minor detours every so often. Around the time our knapsacks were starting to get heavy with herbs and fruits, I felt something jostle around in my waist pouch—the one with Ursula's rose.

“What's wrong?” Mika asked.

I'd stopped in the middle of the road, much to my companion's perplexion. I asked him to wait for a moment and pulled out the rose. Although I could faintly make out Ursula's presence from the slight trembling, she didn't appear from the bud like she'd done before.

Epiphany struck: tonight would have a full moon. Alfar powers ebbed and flowed with the False Moon, so the fully realized form of the Night Goddess naturally indicated a period of weakness for them. If it had taken a new moon for Ursula to appear at the size of a mensch, I doubted she could even take form today.

In essence, I was without my fey backup. *Thank God I didn't invest too much in fey traits.* If I had, someone with anti-Erich tech could've clobbered me on

any new False Moon with my combat value halved.

Jokes aside, it seemed that my current ability to communicate with Ursula only went one way. Without the ability to speak, oscillating in my pouch had been the best warning she could give.

However, that told me nothing about *what* she was trying to tell me. Omission of critical information was dramatic and all, but it wasn't very helpful. It couldn't be that I'd *actually* spawned a boss fight, right? Personally, I felt that my heartfelt conversation with Mika had been plenty climactic.

"Stay on your toes," I said weightily. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Just a hunch? Don't worry, pal, I've got you." Without a shred of doubt, Mika waved his wand and a hole appeared in the dirt. "We should be light on our feet, shouldn't we? Let's bury our stuff here."

Not only had he dug a hole, but he'd also neatly packed the crevice with rocks to prevent any curious wildlife from burrowing into it. I surmised that he'd used some kind of stone-paving cantrip, since those were indispensable to oikodomurges. Mika was showing off all his tricks today, and I finally understood why all those caravans had been so grateful to the mages that accompanied them.

Freed from all our luggage except the bare minimum amount of food and water, I used my meager sneaking skills to lead the way. Mika followed at a distance in order to avoid both of us getting caught up in a potential sneak attack. That left our squishy backline mage all alone if someone snuck up on us from behind, but he had a familiar to watch his back. At the very least, he could cover his six better than I could.

Out of nowhere, a breeze carrying a fetid odor assaulted my nostrils. I knew this smell all too well. I had never wanted it to become familiar to me, but so it went. This was the vile sweetness of rot mingled with the stench of excrement—the smell of death.

Death awaited at every corner of this land, and not only because mensch were comically suited for the act. Exemplary punishments were carried out all across the Empire.

I hadn't seen many in the canton, but every middling city held public executions multiple times a year, stringing up criminal corpses on their castle walls like Christmas lights. On major roads, one could see bandit lackeys and the like participating in the revolutionary new workout method of being hanged by their ankles. Desensitization wasn't a choice, but a necessity.

The heads of the most heinous offenders were preserved in amber and marched across the Empire in a gruesome cross-country tour. Imperial units had even marched through my hometown to show the fates of great villains and insurrectionists, so butchering livestock was far from my only exposure to horrific gore...and the smell had always been the same.

I raised my fist, and Mika recognized our predetermined hand sign, stopping in his tracks. Quietly, I advanced into the thicket; the smell came a ways away from Mika's path. I carefully walked forward so as to not scatter any leaves or twigs—all while fighting the urge to dump points into my Stealth skill—and made my way to the source.

Finding it was far easier than one might expect. I came across the figure of a man standing tall in the middle of the trees without any intention to hide. From behind, I could plainly see his dirty clothes, unkempt hair, mud-stained skin, and most damning of all, his missing left arm: he was undead.

Oh, I should've known. The stench of humanfolk decay was unmistakable; something in my senses could immediately identify this scent as the putridity of mensch flesh.

I'd figured this *might* be the case, and it felt as of late that all my worst predictions were the ones that turned out to be true. Still, as well-read as I was, this was the first time I'd seen this kind of undead in person.

In this world where the existence of souls was common fact, there were a handful of different ways a being could become undying. A setting that employed geists and wraiths but no zombies would be half-baked, and the sculptors of this universe hadn't skimped on adding horror elements to their creation. I think my grimacing face was proof enough of how grateful I was.

As far as the different categories of undead went, the first contained all of the races that lacked an upper bound on their life span. The humanfolk methuselah

and demonfolk vampires were the most famous examples, but as the potential victims of murder, few considered them truly undead. Mainly, the classification had been something of a moniker born out of fear of their awesome regenerative powers. In fact, I'd read that most of these peoples considered the title a misnomer and preferred not to be grouped up in this way.

The second type were those who'd been stripped of—or otherwise lost—their ability to die. What few theological texts I'd read contained passages about divine punishment sometimes depriving us mortals of entitlements we'd thought to be inviolable. Sleep, consumption, and emotion could be taken from us, but the greatest sinners lost the right to *die*.

Those who'd been bereft of sweet release were paired with the more consensually immortal Lady Leizniz and her ilk as the second class of undead...but the man in front of me was clearly neither.

No, he was a case of the third and final type: an empty husk, reanimated without his soul. Magic bent the world to its knees, and there were infinite ways to string up a fleshy puppet to move. Long ago, I'd found a skill tree for summoning undead creatures that could move independently of me and thought, *This is strong!* However, I'd swiftly abandoned the idea when I realized it would probably turn me into a public enemy.

My definition of strength did not make concessions in the role-playing half of an adventure, so that had been an easy option to drop. It didn't matter how big my numbers got if I had to twiddle my thumbs outside the city gates every time my party went to town.

However, someone must have disagreed, because the figure in front of me had been resurrected with that sort of power. If not, then a stray geist or excess ichor must have made its way into a forgotten body—his movements were too devoid of higher intelligence to put in the same caste as Lady Leizniz.

Suddenly, the dead man's neck turned at an impossible angle to face me. His shriveled left eyeball had popped out of its socket, the inertia of his movement swinging it on a fibrous nerve. His right eye was totally missing, having been replaced with mud. As he stared my way with his sightless gaze, his teeth chomped at empty air in unquenchable hunger.

Taken by the appalling sight, a pathetic squeak escaped my throat. *Hold on, how does he even know I'm—wait!* Come to think of it, undead beings could sniff out the presence of souls with some kind of non-physical sensory system, just like alfar.

The man whirled around far more nimbly than the word “zombie” would suggest and sprinted toward me as fast as any full-grown living mensch. His remaining outstretched hand and the clattering castanets of his teeth were fit for a big-budget horror flick—no editing or FX required.

I faced him head-on—but only for a moment. In the next, I took half a step forward. I'd long since drawn Schutzwolfe as a precaution for this very situation, and one swing was enough to lop off the zombie's head. His speed had certainly caught me off guard, but it wasn't anything to write home about. Rather, his brainless simplicity had made him an easy mark.

Besides, the entertainment of my past life had trained me for a run-in with aggressive zombies. My clubmates and I had gotten quite caught up in blowing through hordes of infected as a foursome for a time.

The zombie tumbled forward with full momentum, and his head bounced off a nearby tree to roll to my feet. A clean strike, if I do say so myself. I'd dealt a fatal wound with pinpoint precision.

This was the part where, had I been a whooping jock, I'd get hit for some kind of unpreventable bonus damage and die in a cutscene. But even though I wasn't, this was still a concerning situation. Undead spelled bad news: there could be a nefarious mage hiding out in these woods, or enough ichor to reanimate a corpse, or even—

Hm? I felt something brush my foot. I looked down curiously, only to meet eyes with the head I'd just severed. And behind me, I heard the crunchy sound of someone trampling leaves and branches...

“Whoa?!” I squealed.

I remembered now: these sorts of enemies always resisted physical damage, and critical hits didn't even register!

[Tips] Slashing attacks are less effective against enemies without vitals.

Question: What is the difference between fantasy zombies and modern horror zombies?

Answer: Why they keep going.

“Waaaah!” I screamed like a little baby and punted the disembodied head trying to gnaw on my boots with all the force in my body. It was almost beautiful how far it soared before it disappeared into the forest.

Zombies in modern horror movies arose from viruses, parasites, or genetic mutations, and usually stopped once their head was gone. Sometimes, they’d even go dark if they lost their heart. Outside of a few exceptions that literally could not die, the danger a standard zombie posed ended when their head splattered from a critical shot.

If one were to consider *why* they stopped when their head was removed, then naturally the answer would be that their head was the control center for their body. Whether the cause stemmed from a parasite that overtook the nervous system, a virus that attacked the brain stem and cerebellum, or a general madness that incited senseless violence, it always required a brain to make the rest of the human act.

Working backward, if one assumed the command center was anywhere else, then a zombie could have their head reduced to puree by a shotgun slug and all they’d lose is their main camera-slash-weapon. That didn’t *stop* them in any real sense.

Exhibit A.

Clumsy as it was, the body pushed itself up on its only arm and lunged for me. Knowing Schutzwolfe was too long a blade to swing freely at this range, I flipped her around, grabbing onto the edge with my gloved left hand. After juking the zombie’s grab, I used my entire body to slam my sword’s handle into its gut.

I felt bones crack and flesh split, but the body only staggered backward without collapsing. A living mensch would be gasping for air and hurling up their lunch, but the thing didn’t even seem fazed.

I'd expected as much. If the body didn't need a head to move, then breathing lungs and a beating heart were hardly any more important. I could crush its diaphragm whole, but it simply didn't have the faculties to register its own discomfort.

Extending a Hand to a nearby rock, I applied a few more thorough beatings to be safe. Eons ago, this had probably been the first melee weapon my ancestors had used. The trusty stone continued to dish out plenty of damage to this day...but still the zombie did not die.

This was the horror of fantasy undeath. Animated by mystic or spiritual means, they had no weak point to disable them and none of the reactions to injury of a living organism. While I didn't risk "turning" due to a stray bite or scratch, the thing easily had enough raw strength to pull off a limb, making the silver lining rather gray.

Living mensch flinched when cut, lost their orientation when blinded or deafened, and crumpled in agony when their guts spilled out of their stomach. Some took one look at my childish frame and let their guard down. While the strength of people varied wildly, across the board, they were one of my best matchups.

Yet none of those weaknesses applied to a corpse. The spells I'd developed to disrupt the senses meant nothing against them, and pain would never prevent their advance. I'd tailored my build to produce crit after crit, but here it was all for naught... I'd been attacked by a hard counter that I wasn't yet ready for.

"What do I do now?" I mused, overlooking the wriggling zombie. I was keeping it pinned, but it'd been physically strengthened upon revival. Despite having grips on its back, hand, and knees with my new and improved Unseen Hands, it was clear that the base weakness of the spell was becoming a problem.

This was my greatest weakness post-power spike: I wasn't suited for fights against those that were significantly bigger or stronger than a normal person.

My skill with the blade and my magical endeavors were a mean combo, but a sword was still a sword. The best I could do was cut a narrow segment of flesh—corresponding to the bit near the blade's tip that was especially suitable for

slicing. I didn't have the reach to pierce the heavens nor the area-of-effect to part a sea.

Even though the limits of swordplay in this magical world weren't too different from Earth, there were unfortunately many beings that naturally surpassed the level of a mensch combatant. Entities like the undead that broke all the rules were everywhere, and sooner or later, my emphasis on cutting down humanoids on the battlefield would hit a wall.

I would have liked a skill that let me send shock waves with every slice, but alas, reality did not conform to the logic of weekly shonen manga. No, this planet preferred the grittiness of monthly seinen magazines instead.

That wasn't to say my swordsmanship was ineffective, mind you. My blade was sharp, and a good swing would part armor and scales alike. I was plenty capable of felling giants so long as I chained together critical hits, but severing their girthy limbs or necks was impossible no matter what I tried. Such was the ceiling of swordplay: it offered a chance at victory, but I wasn't about to chop off a monstrous tail before it slammed into my party-mates or anything.

When faced with an enemy that literally didn't have a critical weakness, my own weakness became readily apparent. As I pondered this difficult dilemma, I sensed a spell being cast from behind.

Then, a gray sludge hurtled through the air, splattering onto the squirming body. As soon as it landed, it began to harden from paste to solid.

"Are you all right?!" The dependable oikodomurge at my side had blasted the zombie with quick-drying cement. Enhanced with hedge magic, the viscous liquid lost moisture faster than a sponge in a desert. Not even an undead could overcome hardened concrete, and the small bit of its limbs that remained exposed could do nothing but flail helplessly.



“Thanks, Mika. I didn’t really know what to do.”

I put a hand on his shoulder as a show of thanks and his worried expression finally loosened up. He’d probably rushed over as soon as he’d heard my pathetic shriek.

“You, at a loss in combat?” Mika asked. “I wouldn’t have guessed it with how gallant you look whenever you draw your sword.”

Receiving such excessive praise directly after screaming like a newborn babe was, well, embarrassing enough to wish for death myself—a fact that escaped my old chum. Besides, I wasn’t without my fears, and there were plenty of enemies I’d lose to solo. If someone told me to go take Lady Agrippina’s head, the most damage I could do would probably be to cop a feel while she was sleeping (and naturally, she’d kill me the very next instant). If my mark were Lady Leizniz instead, I wouldn’t even know where to start.

Wait... Am I just surrounded by outright monsters? Ah, but their presence helped keep my ego in check so I didn’t go and get myself killed in a fit of hubris. Yes, of course, I was *lucky* to have them around! Humility was an eternal challenge to maintain, after all.

“Come on, magus,” I teased. “You should know better than me that a lone sword only gets you so far. All a blade’s good for is killing people.”

Faced with an inhuman abomination, I had renewed gratitude for the simplicity of organisms that died when they lost their heads.

“Fair enough. Then I guess that’s all the more reason for me to tag along.”

Mika proudly puffed up his chest. The concrete had already completely hardened without a single crack or bubble. *What a workaholic.*

...Oh. I guess he’s an answer to the undead.

Reanimated beings with physical bodies were blessed with great tenacity and regenerative capabilities. This random reanimated traveler that had attacked me had kept moving after dozens of attacks, and could survive being turned into a pin cushion of spears and arrows.

They were an ideal frontline tank, but a movement debuff rendered them

helpless. This was the zombie equivalent of locking a vampire in a stone coffin and tossing them into a pool of holy water: *Oh, I can't kill them? Well, then I won't bother!*

With his oikodomurge training, Mika was the perfect counter to zombies. He could cover them in concrete like he'd just done, drop them in a pit, or even cover them in concrete after dropping them in a pit to seal them away forever. His finishers were all so *brutal*. I was once again reminded of how exemplary a debuffer my travel buddy was.

"But, boy," Mika said, squatting down by the undead's feet, "zombies are so rare. I wonder where he came from?"

"Pigskin boots and...flaxen clothes," I noted, joining him in observation. "Hey, look at his heel..."

"He must have had spurs. It probably got hooked on a root or something and flew off."

Spurs made some noise and got in the way, so they were usually removable and could be kept on a belt. It went without saying that I'd done so with my own for stealth's sake, but the zombie appeared to have wandered the forest with his still attached, judging from the broken bit on his boot.

From that, we could deduce that he was well-off enough to afford regular travel on horseback. What someone of his stature was doing zombified deep in the woods was a mystery.

I'd booted his head off into the distance, but it was probably best to go recover it to mourn him properly. Although I wasn't quite sure *how* exactly I was meant to put him to rest.

The undead—especially those spawned from ichor overload or geistly possession—may have been an affront to nature, but their fleshy forms gave them resilience to the world's attempts to end them. Unlike an average arcane oddity, these would continue to roam about until they ran out of mana entirely unless somebody stopped them.

If these zombies had been revived with a spell, that was fine. Much like the other mystic oddities mentioned above, they'd have a limited supply of mana

that would run dry eventually. However, geists and ichor hotspots were far less cooperative, and undead of that sort would stick around indefinitely.

Sadly, two laymen were not sufficient to figure out the root cause, leaving Mika and I with nothing we could do despite our passing grasp of the subject. An amateur mycologist might know that only one of two similar mushrooms is poisonous, but it takes an expert to determine which is which, after all. We could rack our brains all day, but we'd just end up thinking that either could be plausible.

Considered sacrilegious creations that spat in the face of divine providence, undead could be purified with miracles. Even without heavenly help, especially powerful alfar and spirits could return these beings to their righteous form.

Too bad that neither of us could do that. Keeping a priest in every party truly was sagacious advice.

Once, my tabletop group had ventured forth on a campaign where we'd forgone the gods of man for lore reasons. The priestless campaign that followed had been hell. Every nick had gone untreated, and we'd steeled ourselves for death at the slightest wound. Our party had despondently sipped at the herbal teas our ranger had made, and the lack of proper medicine had been horrifically similar to the great wars of early modernity.

Mika and I were faced with a different flavor of priestless troubles, and the same thought crossed both of our minds. We locked eyes and wordlessly nodded: *Let's go home. This is bad news.*

Had we been a full party of adventurers, we would've giddily readied up for a session of loot and plunder in a newly discovered dungeon. Regrettably, an arcane swordsman (with an emphasis on swordsman) and a mage specialized for a support role did not make the cut. We weren't trained for this, we hadn't prepared, and worst of all, this was *not* a dungeon-diving composition.

I had no idea what living hell awaited in the depths, but the presence of zombies meant that it certainly wasn't pleasant. This was above the pay grade of kids on a "little" adventure.

The best we could do was report what we'd found and leave it to the professionals. Exploring with reckless abandon was all well and good, but this

was a tad much for a pair of brats without a single coin to their name.

Although those who didn't share Sir Feige's hobbies considered him a stubborn bit of bark, he wasn't unreasonable enough to force this ridiculous task onto us. I was sure he'd give me a new quest if I returned.

I absolutely refused to play with fire. I didn't have the luxury of asking for a new character sheet; besides, I didn't *want* a third one. Pushing myself too hard on the gamble that I might be afforded a third chance was absurd.

Scanning the scene for something we could use as proof, my eyes stopped on the zombie's helplessly flailing hand. If we lopped it off, surely an expert would be able to tell that it'd come from an unusual corpse. With that, we'd be able to avoid being written off as a couple of kids trying to—

“Hey, Erich? I think I heard something move.”

My train of thought was derailed by Mika's foreboding remark. I'd been so wrapped up in what we needed to do that I hadn't paid much attention to our surroundings. I cupped my ear to listen, but the forest was silent.

“I don't—”

As soon as I spoke, I heard the sound of displaced grass. It was south of us: the direction we'd come from. I shut up and turned my ear only to hear another sound. Actually, I heard two, no, three sounds. And once I activated Presence Detection...

“Uh,” Mika said. “Old pal? What's—”

“Mika, check your shoelaces,” I ordered, doing the same myself. I returned Schutzwolfe back to her sheath; I knew she'd just get in the way of a full speed sprint.

“Huh? Okay...”

I was intensely grateful that my friend dutifully obeyed despite his confusion. While he fixed the knot on his shoes, I pulled out the fey karambit—it may have just been me, but its colors seemed more muted than usual—and collected rocks and sticks to use as subweapons with my Unseen Hands.

Argh, I should've known. No one has ever been scared of a lone zombie.

“Eek?!” Mika peeped.

The thicket stirred and trees swayed as undead crawled through the barricade of branches in the dim sunlight. Two, three, four—the members of the amassing crowd were each unique in their own way, but none were intact. They were all unified by the same awful thing: the eternal hunger that drove undead to prey on the living.

“Book it!” I shouted.

How had I forgotten that their ilk always came in a mob? They’d held a place on screens big and small for half a century, and even in the ancient days of black-and-white, they’d been the first monsters to grace the screen in numbers.

I grabbed hold of Mika’s hand and ran, determined to escape the legion of the dead.

[Tips] Those who employ divine miracles have strict limits on what they may borrow godly power to do. Gods of war refuse to confer healing miracles; gods of childbirth do not show their power in military might; and gods of tranquility disallow destruction.

However, all the keepers of the world equally share their ability to right the wrongs that blight the planet. Should the situation call for it, they will share this power with anyone, at any strength.

There were five or six zombies already dashing straight for us; I wasn’t sure exactly how many there were out here, but it was clear that the number was on a one-way fluctuation upward. Enemy reinforcements jumped out at us at every turn.

If only these had been classic Romero zombies, we would’ve had such an easy time. Instead, we were faced with utter menaces that sprinted at full speed and packed a punch to boot. While I could subdue any single one by methodically removing its limbs, we were woefully short on time.

“Hey, Erich, wait!” I’d practically been dragging Mika across the forest floor, and he finally managed to regain his footing by using his wand as a crutch.

“Can’t we slow down a bit?!”

“No way! They’re close! We’re almost surrounded!”

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to take it easy and care for his comfort. New additions to the ever increasing chorus of footsteps were perfectly placed in the most obnoxious spots to encircle us without hope of leaving the woods.

We would’ve been fine if they’d come in a straight line. In that case, Mika could have just summoned a quagmire to trap our pursuers like he’d done to the bandits from the previous day. Being attacked on all fronts made that an impossibility if we hoped to maintain a path home.

Above all else, enveloping ourselves in a defensive structure was the perfect way to lose to classic zombie tactics. If there were enough of them to use their fallen comrades as a footbridge, we’d be completely cornered.

That said, one could argue that fleeing from the impending tide of the dead wasn’t any better: at the end of the day, we were running *into* the woods.

I’d led us deeper into the sea of trees out of sheer instinct; not only did this fail to get us out of harm’s way, but it actively delivered us to more danger. This was the epitome of a fruitless endeavor; my inexperience was on full display.

“Whoa, look out!” Mika screamed.

My companion’s panic brought me out of my private self-loathing; I saw a new zombie jump out from behind a tree I’d been trying to dodge around. A branch had been jammed into his thigh to prop him up in place of his missing leg, and his armor—as light as it was—made it clear he’d been an adventurer or mercenary before passing.

However, I didn’t have the time to get a good look. I smashed two Handfuls of rocks into his face, causing him to tumble backward. With another Hand, I jabbed a fallen twig into his exposed stomach. His tattered armor failed to cover his spongy, rotten flesh, and the branch pinned his body to the floor, keeping him off our tail for the time being.

I could no longer remember how long we’d been running. Mika and I fought off undead attacks twice, and then took turns tripping and covering for each other. At another point he lost grip on his wand, and I cut down a reanimated

body to buy him time to pick it up. When I planted my face in the dirt after my foot got caught on a root, he summoned a wall to protect me.

It felt as though our struggle had gone on for ages, but under the dense canopy it was equally possible that mere minutes had passed. There were only two things that were certain: our exhaustion and the unceasing growth of the sound of footsteps.

Hold on a second. This is ridiculous. This forest is out on the frontier, so there shouldn't be enough people coming and dying here to summon an army this big. Where are they even—

"They're—" Mika wheezed, "they're coming!"

"Oh, damn it all!"

Perhaps my opening set of dice rolls had been too good, and the unceasing torrent of bad luck was my fortune evening out the statistical anomaly. *Gods dammit, I swear I'm cursed... Can't I at least have a moment to cuss out the absurdity of my situation?*

Mika cast a spell—too hastily to live up to his usual standard—to cut off the path we'd come from with a small puddle of mud. Meanwhile, I feverishly beat back the zombies in front of us to cut a path forward.

As we continued this game of chase, a suspicion took hold of my mind: were we being *led* somewhere?

My revelation may have come too late. I say that because we tore through a gap in the trees to a clearing lit by unfiltered sunlight, only to be greeted by the entrance to a labyrinth, its door wide open.

The building seemed to be an abandoned house, but was better described as some sort of avant-garde architectural exhibit: wooden structures stacked on top of one another like building blocks, chaotically sprawling in every direction like a child's drawing. On closer inspection, each segment looked like it had been copied and pasted from one normal house to create this monstrosity.

Just looking at it was enough to tell it was bad news. Under any other circumstance, we wouldn't get anywhere close, let alone jump in the open front door. Had I been sitting at a table with a character sheet, I'm sure my PC would

have set the place ablaze, no questions asked. But nothing this sinister could bring about anything good, and I would be surprised if the thing could catch fire at all; a GM would have to be truly insane to introduce a place this menacing without accounting for the basic counters.

Regretfully, we didn't quite have a choice.

"Run for it!" I shouted.

"You bet!"

We leapt out of the thicket and an uncountable swarm of the undead leapt out with us. I was at a loss for how a horde of this size had managed to stay hidden for so long.

I scurried inside gasping for air and tackled the door behind us shut, and Mika pressed his wand to the frame. He muttered a chant under his breath and spawned a lock, then another, then yet another, finishing his work off with a bar that spanned the doorway. With our defenses in place, the hungry zombies' violent banging did little more than rustle the wood.

We leaned back against the door and slid down to the floor in unison. Our shoulders heaved up and down as we wolfed down air in an attempt to fill our empty lungs; our hearts were still pounding in a frenzy.

"But you know..." I said.

"Yeah, I know..." Mika echoed.

"*We're in a bind*," we said together. I sighed, and Mika put a hand to his forehead in sympathy. Once again, we'd leapt from the frying pan to the fire.

"I'm sorry," I panted. "I screwed up. I should've led us back the way we came..."

"Come on, old pal, it's not your fault," Mika said between labored breaths. "We didn't have a choice. Besides, I think they were corralling us here. I bet there were another two or three packs of zombies waiting near the entrance to the woods."

He handed me our waterskin. I took a swig, soaking up the sensation as moisture returned to my weathered flesh. We passed the drink around a

handful of times, and the much-needed hydration helped me finally regain my cool.

Mika was right to say that we'd been led here, and the assumption that more obstacles had been waiting to block our path back out was reasonable. That then begged the question of how someone had managed to amass this many undead, and how they'd placed them so perfectly to fence us in. However, trying to answer those questions only brought more of their kind, so I decided to put that train of thought to the side. Our main priority was determining how we'd turn the tables.

"Mika, can you get in touch with your familiar?" I asked.

His raven had played a crucial role during the chase, scoping out the paths with the fewest zombies lying in wait. Even though he couldn't speak any languages, it wasn't a stretch to think we could at least use him to call for help.

Yet after a few moments of closing his eyes in concentration, Mika let out a loud sigh and shook his head.

"No good," he said. "I can't feel anything from Floki's end—something's getting in the way. I'm pretty sure he's alive, but I can't send him any orders or tap into his vision."

"That's a shame. We're out of options, huh?"

Our only means of contacting the outside world was unavailable. Even if I were to acquire Thought Transfer on the spot, I doubted I could overcome whatever barrier had blocked Mika. Besides, I would have needed to prepare by entrusting Lady Agrippina with a mystic tool to pinpoint the destination of my telepathy.

"So," Mika said, "does this mean..."

"...We're on our own," I concluded.

The probability of rescue was minimal. My overpowered allies were at the faraway capital, the fey help I kept in my back pocket would need several nights' time to regain their strength, and Sir Feige was unlikely to realize we were in trouble for at least a few days.

It went without saying that no one came to this overgrown wilderness for fun, but even if someone were to come, they'd certainly be comparable to us. The odds of a visitor being on the level of my master or that unhinged wraith approached mathematical impossibility.

Boiling everything down, the only people we could count on to solve our predicament were ourselves.

"I knew I jinxed it..." I mumbled.

"Jinxed what?"

I slouched over, too upset to even explain what I meant to my confused friend. I'd foolishly spoken about our bandit run-in as a wandering encounter, and lo and behold, a main quest complete with a full-on dungeon had spawned in to give our session some direction. There was no doubt in my mind that a climactic boss fight awaited at the end... This may have all been my brain connecting dots that weren't there, but I swore to avoid foreshadowing statements going forward.

"Going forward," huh? Ah... I still had a future to worry about: kicking the bucket here wasn't an option.

I rose to my feet and looked myself over. As tired as I was, I didn't have any injuries. Mika was much the same.

On the magical front, I'd only used Unseen Hands and hadn't done any complex maneuvers with them, so I remained pretty much topped off. However, Mika had used a lot of spells to slow down the mob. No matter how exemplary a mage he was, I didn't want to push him too hard.

I unhooked the lantern I'd brought just in case and ignited it with a small mystic flame. The interior of the building was lit only with what little sunshine made it through the cracks in the ceiling. My Cat Eyes prevented total blindness, but I sorely lacked true darkvision.

"All right," I said. "Ready to head in?"

"Sure thing. I can handle the light."

Handing Mika the lantern, we slowly made our way forward. Our situation

was desperate as is, and the only way out was to follow the path set out for us and win our freedom through a trail of blood. Although I'd yet to come across any evidence that the creators of this world knew anything about level design, our situation wasn't *completely* hopeless. At any rate, I wasn't willing to give up while my body was still physically intact.

The floorboards in the hallway creaked no matter how carefully I made my steps, and we walked by a number of doors. Looking closely, I noticed that every door was exactly the same. Taking even more time to scrutinize, I could see that the hallway had been made of a recurring pattern, and each instance of the hallway had been very poorly stitched together. It felt as though we were walking in a half-assed indie game with terrible textures, which threw my sense of scale and direction out the window.

We went around opening doors that led to nowhere—literally, since the things opened to reveal a wall—and carved X-marks into the ones we'd checked. Suddenly, Mika spoke up in a moment of epiphany.

"You know, I think this is what they call an ichor maze. I've only ever read about it in passing, but..."

With his short disclaimer out of the way, the College student shared his knowledge. According to him, cursed lands brimming with ichor or other arcane emissions eventually morphed into what we saw now. Ichor was a distorting force, and high concentrations bent the laws of physics to create these sorts of labyrinthian structures. The result of this so-called mazification process gave birth to what we knew as ichor mazes.

Oh, now it all clicks. The presence of a corrupted monolith like this explained how this ocean of greenery in the middle of nowhere had become a garden of death.

Yet for all the logical sense that it made, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of ungodly luck was needed for me to stumble across something like this in the middle of a child's adventure. My character sheet didn't include a LUK stat, but if it was recorded as an invisible value, I was certain it'd be crawling near the bottom of the chart. It might not be my place to say this, but the consistency of my misfortune was getting out of hand.

This sort of grand dungeon ought to have been scaled for an experienced party, not us. I cursed the bad luck that had followed me between lives and cracked open another door. Immediately, a pungent stench sent a cold sweat down my back. I'd grown all too used to it during our stint in the woods: the smell of rotting mensch.

"Erich..."

"I know... Let's do this."

There were bound to be enemies inside this tomb, but that was nothing new in this dreary chapter of the book of my youth. I swallowed back the lump in my throat and entered the room.

Broken furniture littered the interior, and the smell of wood mingled with decay. A lone zombie stood in the center. Though his travel wear and oversized cloak were stained black with blood, it was clear enough that he'd been an experienced wayfarer in his day—which made it all the more a shame that his head, full of memories of distant lands, had been chopped clean off.

In his right hand, he held an exotic sword: its blade was skinnier near the handle and gained breadth nearer to the tip. Falchions like these were relatively similar to broad-bladed knives, giving them popularity among ignoble people as both a worker's tool and simple weapon. Of course, the zombie's sword bore traces of its use toward more violent ends.

He was alone. The dimensions of the room each measured a few meters—plenty for a good fight. To top it all off, all of the reanimated corpses we'd encountered so far had been missing a part of their bodies. I couldn't say for sure, but I had a feeling I understood what the aim of this ichor maze was. Our esteemed adventurer friend had left us a rather distasteful parting gift.

"Mika, save your energy," I said, stepping in front of my companion with Schutzwolfe in hand. "Single combat is my specialty."

Right as I finished speaking, the zombie slashed at me more quickly than any corpse had a right to move. Despite swinging short, he made good use of his top-heavy blade to offset his lack of windup. Although his attack didn't want for technique, I parried it and stepped forward to counterattack.

However, the rotting man matched my footwork and deftly turned his wrist in order to regain control of his falchion and prepare for my advance.

...This zombie can dance.

As impressed as I was, I wasted no time reworking my strike into a stab. I thrust my upper half as my foot landed—the force generated from my body weight convened on a single point would be enough to pierce all but the sturdiest defense.

Yet in place of blocking, the corpse leaped back. Once my attack failed to connect, he struck my extended sword with his own, knocking my arms away. His style was perfectly sound, and it was clear he had a grasp of his unique weapon's strengths and weaknesses. Falchions were ill-suited for blocking and parrying, so instead he'd waited for the moment I'd used up my forward momentum and knocked my weapon to the side. This was the conduct of a thinking *person* making use of their battlefield experiences.

With Schutzwolfe no longer covering the space between us, the zombie took a nimble step forward and swung his blade overhead—aiming not for my head, but my shoulder. I may have had armor on, but taking the brunt of the impact head-on would undoubtedly shatter two or three bones at least.

Of course, I was too experienced and too skilled to let such a fate befall me. As soon as he batted Schutzwolfe away, I delicately shifted my right hand to roll her into a backhand grip; my left hand let go of the handle entirely, sliding down to grab the middle of the blade. He hadn't hit my sword away so much as I'd *let* him hit it in just the right way to use the inertia to rework my hand positions.

I caught his blade between Schutzwolfe's handle and handguard with a metallic clang. Although his sword dug into the wood, the steel tang buried within did a fine job of stopping it.

My hands were shaking after the collision, but I immediately regained control. The zombie attempted to push through, and I countered by swiveling my sword; the torque afforded from having a hand on the blade allowed me to free my handle from his falchion while positioning my blade right beneath his armpit.

Naturally, pushing a blade flat onto an enemy is hardly a good way to pierce skin. However, he'd been using all his force to try and push through my defenses a fraction of a second earlier, and by using his own downward force against him, Schutzwolfe's razored edge was enough to make a clean cut.

The weight behind his own swing let me slice straight through, severing his right arm. It flew off with the foreign sword still in hand, and the body left behind toppled forward in a sorry state.

Our battle had lasted but an instant, and a handful of microinteractions had determined the victor. This was what made swordplay so lovely: for all its intricacies, it was so very *simple*.

Showered in blood, I swung into the corpse's left shoulder as he collapsed. The pointed edge of my blade cleaved straight through his garments to send his remaining arm after the first. After removing both legs and hollowing out the fleshy tendons near the joints, all the undead creature could do was writhe around helplessly.

Steadying my breathing from a slight pant, I flung the blood off Schutzwolfe. The trusty blade would not crack so easily from the savage necessity of dismemberment, but I hardly wanted her to remain covered in grime.

As the black sludge splattered onto the floor, I thought to myself, *That could have been the warm blood still flowing through my veins.*

This zombie had been strong. I'd only endured a few of his attacks, but each one had threatened certain death. Each strike had been technically perfect, and the trained plan of action he'd employed was a rarity among even the living. From what I'd seen, I estimated his ability to equate to something like V: Adept, at the very least. Had someone from the Konigstuhl Watch been here to face him, I suspected that they'd only barely win—that is, if they survived at all.

The sound of my own deep breath was masked by creaking wood. I turned to see the door in the back of the room had opened all on its own.

Well, well, well. I knew it'd turn out like this.

[Tips] Zombies are capable of wildly different things depending on the

quality of the spells—or geists—that resurrect them. Some even retain all of their skills from when they were alive.

Bunkering down is a classic staple of zombie flicks. Then what of dungeon diving? Common tropes include dastardly villains hiding in crypts, treasure laying in wait, and moments of reprieve during an unexpectedly long exploration. Everyone has their favorite, but there are two that are absolutely essential: locks and trap-laden puzzles.

“All right, what’s it say?”

“Let me see... Ugh, I can’t read this bloody handwriting...”

After defeating the first zombie, Mika and I had walked through a series of hallways until we’d come across a mysterious sign. It was placed between two doors and read: *I am your lifelong friend, waiting in the room beyond. We take arms together, eat together, bathe together, and sleep together. I alone am worthy of your respect and friendship. Find me and the truth shall follow.*

“It’s a riddle,” I said.

“So we’re supposed to go to the door that corresponds to the answer?” Mika asked. “I wonder what happens if we get it wrong?”

“I’d rather not think about that...”

The bloody scrawl was unmistakably the classic sort of brain teaser meant to lead a party to the correct path. Taking a step back, this was the sort of thing that might cause a player to smile to themselves and think, *Aww, the GM must have been really excited about this.*

“I think I might know this one,” I said.

“Funnily enough, so do I,” Mika said.

We counted to three and both pointed to the right door. The “lifelong companion” was a metaphor for our corporeal forms that served us until death, but nothing about weaponry, food, bathing, or sleep implied anything substantial about direction.

However, respect and friendship were epitomized by handshakes, which were

traditionally done with the right hand. Going up the social ladder, aristocratic pleasantries included bowing with one's right hand covering the right breast. It was a show of good faith that one was willing to preoccupy their dominant hand, and all four-limbed races in the Empire followed this etiquette.

Whoever ran this labyrinth was clearly a fan of classic dungeon design with little taste for twists. Judging from how the first room had opened its doors after the inhabitant zombie was defeated, I doubted we'd run into a riddle with no solution or a punishment for answering too confidently.

Still, it didn't hurt to be cautious, so I had Mika wait at a safe distance and slowly leaned against the door with three layers of hardened Unseen Hands to shield me. With my ear on the wood, I quietly listened for activity...and heard nothing. I jiggled the knob for a moment and felt nothing more than the resistance of rust. Upon turning it all the way, the latch opened with a normal click without any extraneous adjustments.

Finally, I opened the door to find another hallway indistinguishable from the one we were already in. I extended my strengthened Hands to feel out the floor, but found no evidence of pitfalls or pressure plates to activate spike traps.

I'd been right: both about the riddle and the dungeon keeper's tastes.

"All clear, Mika. Looks safe. Let's keep going."

"Gotcha. Boy, I was really sweating, but you sure seem used to this. How much do you know about maze traps?"

"Just the basics. I can't match up to a professional."

I shrugged off his praise, and then realized I didn't even *know* a professional when it came to this sort of thing. Margit was unmatched in the great outdoors, but I doubted she knew anything about lockpicking or trap disarmament. Going forward, I'd need to work out the details myself or hire an actual specialist.

Well, as it was a Dexterous activity, I could probably handle even the most intricate machinations. I'd consider it whenever I got more experience points to play with.

As we continued down the hallway, a scrap of paper on the floor caught my eye. I picked up the cheap stationery to find someone had penned a diary entry

on it with charcoal. There were traces of someone having bound the left hand side with string, so it must have originated from a full journal.

“No way...”

“Is that the diary we’re supposed to find?” Mika asked, bringing the lantern closer.

Deciphering the chicken scratch, the date at the top indicated the memo had been written nearly sixty years ago. It touched on the weather, the adventurer’s progress on his most recent job, and the interesting bits of the accompanying journey. This page in particular recounted an episode where the goblin who acted as his party’s scout had bungled the seasoning on dinner one night, and how they’d all laughed about watering down their beef stew to make the excess salt manageable.

The dots were connecting. At this point, I was fairly certain I knew who’d spawned this ichor maze.

Creaking wood interrupted our reading time. We looked up in a panic to find that the door forward had opened up, as if to hurry us along. Inside, I could see two shadows waiting in the wings.

“Well, well. Aren’t we eager?” I quipped in an attempt to distract myself from the fear that accompanied a battle with the undead.

“Hey, we might bite, but this kind of hospitality isn’t very popular with the ladies, you know?” Mika added on more banter, easing my mind further.

All right, it’d be rude to keep them waiting. We advanced.

[Tips] An ichor maze is a reflection of its master’s personality.

What is harder to come by than a good friend? One who cares for you—who will draw his blade and lay his life on the line in your hour of need? Nothing is rarer than a true friend.

“Oh, for *fuck’s* sake!”

Even when he shouted expletives that he would never stoop to on a normal

day, mine was dazzling as he danced a waltz of steel perfected through years of practice. Erich of Konigstuhl was beautiful: he'd called me his friend, and he'd let me call him mine.

His flashing blade swung down. Although he'd started his strike later than one of the zombies, it was the undead soul who lost both the exchange and its sword hand. Erich avoided the splattering blood with a flick of his neck, only to gracefully land a kick on the zombie he'd disarmed. All the while, his movements had put him in the perfect place to elbow the zombie that had been trying to jump him from behind in the mouth.

Bolstered with hard leather and metal tacks, Erich's arm dislodged the creature's jaw, and it tumbled backward. The one he'd kicked in the gut had collapsed onto its back.

Readying my wand, I recited the incantation I was usually too lazy to chant. Spells and cantrips alike took slightly less mana if the caster carefully tried to convince the world they followed more of the rules than they did. It was a humiliating bit of pageantry by Rhinian standards, but that was a burden I was willing to bear for my best friend.

"Pillars rise from bedrock at every turn; yet their support alone shall not suffice. I ask for a guardian—for ever-watchful eyes."

I squeezed out my mana, using my ad-libbed incantation to give the cantrip structure. One of the zombies had retreated to the wall, and my magic caused a nearby column of wood to reach out and entangle it.

Many considered oikodomurges to be burdens in direct combat, but there were plenty of crafty ways for me to contribute. By fidgeting with the composition of the wood that made up columns and beams in houses, I could bend the building itself to my will—a favorite trick from the oikodomurge handbook. Personally, I thought our ability to trip up enemies made us relatively helpful in battle, especially indoors.

"Light your pipe and boil your tea—your shift of guardianship shall never end!"

My magical words painted the unliving sacrifice as a true part of the pillar, strengthening the wood's hold. Undead beings had little resistance to arcane

concepts, since they weren't technically alive, and the zombie quickly melted into the column.

"Thanks, Mika!"

"No problem! I've got your back!"

Despite its best efforts, the zombie was almost completely swallowed, taking it out of the equation. More importantly, I was ecstatic to see Erich smile so gratefully at what little assistance I could provide.

This was the third room with zombies in it thus far. Erich had handily conquered the first, and the second room's three foes hadn't posed much of a challenge for him either. The way he'd managed to brush off their attacks while rerouting them to hit other enemies was astonishing.

Between each combat trial, we'd worked together to solve a puzzle. I wouldn't say I'd been amazing, but I think I'd been a real help. The second one, where we had to use four keys in four locks in the right order, had been pretty hard, and the latest one had involved higher arithmetic that made Erich dizzy. Thankfully, my coursework involved a lot of math. I doubted I'd ever forget the wide-eyed praise he'd given me when I'd solved it.

Now, as if to make up for not being able to help on the arithmetic problem, he was showing off his polished swordplay in spades. The number of zombies had increased to five, and they'd been carefully set to surround us as we entered, but he'd instantly cleaned up two of them. I'd summoned a fence to block off a few and tried my hand at binding them when I could, but there was no honor worthy enough to describe the skill needed to do what Erich was doing.

He was risking his life at every moment, all to shield me from harm. My support wasn't much to speak of in comparison, but the least I could do was keep away the extra zombies...even if that meant enduring the awful headache that came with mana depletion.

Look, he's done it again! Parrying a spear with a sword was supposed to be extremely difficult, yet time after time Erich stopped enemy thrusts without so much as batting the things away. After bringing a zombie's spear to a gentle stop with his sword, he locked it in place and dashed forward, slicing through

the reanimated corpse's underarm with the knife in his left hand.

It was truly a sight to behold: his steps flowed like a dancer's and never stopped until his foes were vanquished.

The zombie's arm went limp, and Erich lightly pressed the tip of his sword into its left armpit as well. Simultaneously, he summoned an Unseen Hand to recover the spear it'd dropped. What was ordinarily a household spell morphed into a martial spectacle under his command, composed of a beautiful arcane formula.

His Hand lifted the spear high and quivered for a moment before plunging the weapon into its previous master. It pierced the headless warrior's armor with great force, pinning the zombie to the wall. The cadaver tried to free itself, but Erich simply bent the spear's shaft to a right angle. Seeing his discretion from an ally's perspective inspired endless confidence.

At long last, he walked over and dismembered the zombie he'd kicked to the floor with all the dispassion of a butcher readying a hog. With that, we'd managed to successfully surmount another room.

"Phew," he gasped. "Five... That's five."

Erich was the pinnacle of reliability in battle. Although his movements were refined and graceful, they were not flashy; rather, the beauty lay in the fact that every action was perfectly suited for the act of killing.

Unlike the heroes of our favorite sagas, he couldn't reduce his foes to shreds with a single glorious strike. Bit by bit, he strung together honest attacks to protect me from the enemies he bested. There was something about the way he kept their blades from reaching me that spoke to an image of sincerity personified.

Oh, Erich, my dearest friend. How kind can you be? To call me a friend, to let me do the same for you, and to risk your life so that we might go home together...even though I'm starting to become dead weight for you to carry.

"Mika, you're not looking so good. Here, have some water."

"But Erich, we're almost out..."

“Don’t worry about it. Worst case, we can extract some moisture from the air. Drink up. A little lost water’s better than having you faint on me.”

I knew Erich was tired. He’d been fighting all this time, and I doubted his sword and armor could be considered light. I was sure he was tired, and even surer he was thirsty.

Yet you choose to give it to me...

I indulged in his goodwill and took a single swig from our waterskin, but he waited, encouraging me to drink more. I knocked back another mouthful, and something snapped inside of me—I couldn’t stop. I took a third swig, then a fourth, and by the time I regained control of myself, the pouch felt significantly lighter.

I didn’t mean to... My fatigue was all magical; I shouldn’t have been too tired, physically speaking.

“You didn’t have to leave me any, you know? But thanks.”

Erich took the nearly empty waterskin and downed the remaining mouthful or so of water without so much as a gripe. Without knowing how much longer we had to go, mana was a commodity more precious than gold coins; yet he then cast a spell to refill our reserves with airborne moisture without a moment’s hesitation.

I had to pull my own weight. My headache was still on the lighter side, and rehydrating had definitely helped. So long as I cushioned my mana costs with proper incantations, I would be able to persist.

If you’re going to put your life on the line for me, then I’ll do the same for you. Isn’t that what friends are for?

[Tips] The effects of mana depletion are generally thought of in five stages. First, a light dizziness. Second, a stinging headache. Third, an unbearable migraine. Fourth, bleeding from either the nose or ears. Fifth, inevitable brain death.

For whatever reason, I felt as though Mika’s gaze had become rather fiery

since entering the dungeon. This may have all been in my head, but something about the way he'd been watching my back was different from usual—not that I could verbalize *what* was off, but it was different all the same.

Perhaps it was the heat of combat. The rushing blood of battle degraded my vocabulary—I wouldn't dare repeat the things I'd been shouting here in front of my parents—so I could understand where he was coming from. I could count the times I'd flirted with death on one hand, but the thrill of the fight was already stamped on my soul. This was Mika's first time in a dungeon *and* his first time fighting in close quarters; no wonder the excitement was taking hold of him.

"All right," I said, "let's get moving."

"Sure thing. What do you think will be next?"

That sounded vaguely jinx-worthy to me—maybe I'd heard a similar line in a film or novel—but Mika seemed to be raring to go. I opened the next door and instantly groaned.

Three tables were lined up in the middle of the room. Each had a pile of small wooden knickknacks piled on top.

"Um..." Mika looked the handicrafts over. "Looks like a set of pieces for a wooden puzzle."

"Yeah," I said dejectedly. "It's one of those silhouette puzzles..."

I'd been quick to realize that the dungeon keeper had a penchant for riddles, but seeing *this* made me want to bury my head in my hands and ignore the challenge.

The rules were simple: we were to combine wooden triangles and squares to match the provided image, which, in this case, had been drawn directly on the table. It hadn't been a very popular board game in Japan, save for the occasional traditional inn that kept a set in their lobby.

However, it was cheap and easy, making it second only to ehrengarde in the Trialist Empire. All one needed to play were simple wooden cutouts and the creativity to think up new images to make, making it an inexpensive pastime. My brothers and I had spent many a winter day cooped up indoors trying to

come up with new shapes.

Each table in this room demanded one image: from right to left, they were a sword, shield, and staff. Annoyingly, the riddle introduced nonstandard rules. Usual sets were composed of five large triangles, five small triangles, a square, and a parallelogram. All the tables had double that, and there was a cheeky hourglass waiting for us to suggest we were on a time limit.

Up until this point, all the challenges had been related to skills that I could see an adventurer needing, but *come on!* Thinking back, there had been a guy in my old tabletop crew who'd filled his dungeons with handmade puzzles for us to solve out of universe with a real INT or EDU check. Whenever we failed, he'd mist us with poison gas so we'd have to enter the boss fight with debuffs, and it looked like this ichor maze intended on doing the same.

"Seriously?" I said. "These look legitimately hard. What kind of adventurer needs to solve wooden puzzles?"

"Maybe it helps when exploring ruins," Mika suggested. "They say that ancient lithography slates sell for a ton if you can find all the pieces to put them together."

I groaned again. Chipped bits of stone that came from antique tablets in games did often come with checks for Dexterity or prior knowledge to put them back together. Even if a quest only involved picking up the pieces for a historian, the adventurer still needed to know which parts were important enough to warrant bringing back. Sadly, this puzzle was actually relevant.

By the way, the particular session that sprang to mind had ended in disaster when I'd rolled to apply my archaeological knowledge to the broken relic. My dice had done their duty, causing the slate to crumble to dust, and the whole party had sat in silence for quite some time... Regardless, there was no getting around the task at hand.

"Ready?" Mika asked.

"Yeah, flip it."

Mika started the hourglass and we began building. The sword was just four pointed tips, so it wasn't all that difficult. We still had two-thirds of the sand left

—the whole thing felt like about half an hour—by the time we were finished. The only hard part had been making sure every piece had been accounted for.

Working in a pair makes this so easy, I thought. However, my hubris was brought to heel immediately.

“All right, that’s the shield done too, so now—”

“Wait a second! Erich, we still have another piece! Look, one of the small triangles is still out!”

“What the—you’ve got to be kidding! How are we supposed to fit *this* in?!”

“I think that means it’s *all* wrong! Argh, this is so hard...”

The rule forbidding leftover pieces was the true challenge. One unused shape indicated a fundamental mistake, meaning we’d need to start all over. As the panic set in, the last grains of sand fell from the top of the hourglass to the bottom...and by the time I noticed, our punishment had already begun.

A door squeaked open and six zombies spilled into the room. Although they were all unarmed, their armor was in better condition than any of the others we’d seen, making this fight far from trivial. Our punishment wasn’t quite as bad as instant death, but this wasn’t anything to be grateful for.

“Dammit... Mika, are you good to go?”

“Y-Yeah, I can fight.”

My wingman’s response was less than ideal; I needed to take care of this, and fast. Going full throttle was exhausting, but it was better than getting hurt. Mana recovered with rest, but lost blood, broken bones, and eaten flesh were harder problems to fix. Neither of us knew much about body-enhancing magic either.

“Heed my call, o loyal blades—my armed champions...”

Imperial magia did not chant out spells. Doing so was flowery, lame, and suggested that the caster needed crutches to bend the world to their will; basically, magia were like high schoolers acting cooler than younger kids. However, I was amateur enough to actually need all the help I could get. Dredging up my real embarrassing memories from my time in middle school

was a small price to pay for a bit of efficiency.

“Stand, stand tall before me. Take your swords into your unflinching hands.”

My words reached the bundled-up rags that had slowly piled up with every room. It unfurled itself to reveal my trophies of war—weapons coated with the blood I’d shed from a minor nick—which then floated into the air.

“Go forth and bring me their heads!”

I summoned all the Hands I could muster and equipped each with armaments I’d picked up throughout the labyrinth. A bent spear pierced the zombie vanguard’s neck, driving him into the wall. Not an instant later, a dagger, longsword, and falchion whizzed over to rob him of all his limbs. Fetid blood spewed out with hideous giblets, yet the undying man could not let go of life, and he clattered his teeth in frustration.

The five behind him quickly followed, and I meticulously dismembered them as fast as my technique allowed. Whether they were mensch, floresiensis, cynocephalus, or anything else, the bipedal body plan varied little. A blade stuck in the soft flesh of their joints reduced them to little more than smelly meat.

“Eat dirt, assholes!”

It hadn’t taken long for me to clean up the whole crowd...but the strain on my mana reserves was intense. Going all-out was incredibly exhausting, even with the help of a voiced incantation. I could only unleash my full suite one more time—*maybe* two. The dungeon was doing a good job of whittling away my stamina.

“Erich, don’t strain yourself like that,” Mika said, running over to me with our nearly empty waterskin in hand. “You could’ve let me help.”

“Who’s the one really straining themselves? I can tell your headache is already setting in.” I glanced up pointedly from on my hands and knees, and he grunted, knowing I’d gotten him.

Looking back at the table, the pieces for the puzzle we’d failed had disappeared. Apparently, the person in charge was willing to let us off if we won in combat. The compassion I felt from the dungeon keeper ironically made me wonder what on earth was wrong with the crazed GMs who insisted on

assigning the same puzzle again and again until the party got it right.

“Fair enough,” Mika said. “But you take a break, Erich.”

Just as I tried to get up to go to the final table, Mika pushed me back down by the shoulders. He went and got the hourglass and wooden parts from the table and laid them out on the ground. Then he grabbed my shoulders one more time and forced my head onto his lap.

“Leave the rest to me.”

Stop, you’re making me blush.

Possessed by a bottomless well of determination, Mika’s expression was worryingly grim as he shifted the pieces. In the end, he solved the deformed staff that had looked to be the most difficult of the three images with more than half the hourglass’s sand to spare.

[Tips] Jigsaw puzzles with round teeth only arose in modernity, but the idea of playing with wooden shapes has been around for all of history.

I’m so glad I carry around the bare necessities at all times.

“Ahh,” Mika sighed. “It’s good to get some rest.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “How’s your headache?”

“A bit better.”

Time felt nebulous inside of the ichor maze, but our progress was more certain. We’d just finished another pair of rooms. While the combat hadn’t changed from the original pattern of facing off against skillful armed zombies, the mental exercises were evolving at an unprecedented rate.

Here was the riddle in the room we’d just finished: *Hope resides in one of five boxes. Yet hope is fleeting, and oft rolls from side to side. It moves once every day, and so too can you only check a single box once every day. Will you be able to take hold of hope? If so, when shall your paths converge?*

Tricky as this question seemed, Mika had crushed it in seconds. I’d still been trying to wrap my mind around all the conditions when he’d answered, “We can

find hope, and it'll be on the sixth day or earlier."

According to him, moving from "side to side" meant that hope could only move to the boxes closest to its left or right. Therefore, one could determine how long it took to find hope (barring any lucky guesses) by simply numbering the boxes.

How exactly did that process work, you ask? Well, I'd asked him the same question and he'd put a finger to his lips and said, "Try and work it out yourself."

Damn it all.

Whatever, I wasn't about to complain when we managed to get through unscathed. The bigger concern was the door that we'd unlocked. It was a large set of double doors that had a different air about it than any of the passageways we'd come across so far—the sort of gateway that usually came with a message that read *Are you sure you want to continue?*

Our sense of time was totally out of whack and we were unsure of how far we'd even walked, so we decided to rest up for what seemed to be the finale. We traded precious mana for water and boiled it in a metal cup, and I pulled my perpetual travel buddy out of my pouch: crushed-up red tea.

The result was more powdery than the usual stuff, but it served to soothe our weary bodies as we passed the cup back and forth.

Afterwards, we decided to take turns napping, since mana recovered fastest while sleeping. Besides, the physical fatigue was starting to pile up too. Although we couldn't see outside, we'd picked our fair share of flowers in the corners of some of the rooms, so the time we'd spent here was far more than a couple of hours. Breaks were imperative; any lapse in concentration could lead to a fatal mistake.

Nothing seemed to suggest we had to begin the final encounter right away, so taking this time to rest was the smart thing to do. Mika's mana issues were worse than mine on account of all the magic he'd cast to help in the combat rooms, so I lent him my lap and offered to let him sleep first.

All things considered, we lived under a pretty poorly defined system of time

where a day began when one woke up and ended when one slept, making this a very long day. Not even the corporate slavery of my past life had been this bad. I would have much preferred working until sunrise because of a sudden change in project specifications, even if that also involved going around in the morning apologizing to everyone that was even remotely affected by the changes.

At least that had been *work*. My coworkers and I had worked those terrible nights out of a shared sense of responsibility—a sentiment that allowed us to clink our beers after everything had been said and done with weary grins, laugh, and cry out at once, “To hell with it! Cheers!”

But this time? This time, I—

“Old pal?”

As I sank into the limitless depths of remorse, a cold hand on my cheek interrupted my thoughts. I looked down to see my pal’s sleepy eyes staring back at me. Even when on the brink of exhaustion, his beauty remained radiant.

“Don’t regret a thing,” Mika said.

My eyes opened wide. How had he known?

Truth be told, I was overcome with guilt for having dragged him with me to this hell. I’d meant for this to be a little adventure. Yet we opened the lid on our journey to unveil a frenzied dance of death accompanied by zombies and gore.

We were marching on a path, unsure if there was a destination at all. Who knew if we could make it out alive?

Had Mika been a fellow adventurer, ready to lay down his life in the name of exploration, I wouldn’t belittle him with this kind of concern. But he wasn’t—he was just my friend. He’d joined me because we’d sworn an oath of friendship the night before, and I’d taken advantage of his excitement to drag him along.

Bringing my kindhearted companion to wade through this river of blood hurt my heart so badly that I wanted to carve it out of my chest. As meaningless as it was, I would have done so in a heartbeat if it meant he’d get home safe.

“I don’t regret a thing, you know,” Mika said. “I mean, I managed to stop you from running into this hellhole alone, didn’t I?”

He flashed me a smile of pure compassion, trying to convince me not to worry because he himself was free of grief. How virtuous must one's soul be to care so deeply for another, knee deep in the dead? How could he still want to follow me into this ordeal? I wouldn't have blamed him if he'd cried out, damning me with every breath... In fact, some part of me wanted him to.

"So smile, Erich. A smile suits you so much better than a frown."

"...Yeah," I finally said. "You're right."

I couldn't refuse a request from my best friend, so I pulled back my lips into a clumsy grin.

Content, Mika closed his eyes and dozed off. I brushed his bangs aside and stared at his weary features before covering him with my cloak.

Gods, I truly have found a lifelong friend.

[Tips] Ichor mazes can warp the flow of time, leading to temporal discrepancies between the inside and outside.

"Shall we?"

"Yep. I'm good to go."

After a short nap each, we sated our hunger with what little food we had and were then as ready as we'd ever be. The doors ahead announced the presence of a climactic encounter, but we were determined to see this through. We advanced toward home no matter what the world threw our way, prepared to cut down anyone or anything that stood in our path.

The great min-maxers of old had declared that God Himself could be struck down if the numbers allowed. So what was an insurmountable task or two to us? We had no fear of roadblocks; all that remained was to clobber our way past.

Mika and I struggled to push the weighty doors open, but when we did, the world opened up to a vast space pasted together out of scaled-up rooms, their adjoining walls omitted. Despite all the willpower I'd mustered, I could feel my

courage shrivel when I laid eyes on the seven zombies lined up to greet us. *I've had my fill, thank you.*

Had these undead monsters been the sort of forgettable mobs who needed numbers to count as a proper unit, I wouldn't have minded. Those sorts of weaklings were only placed as fodder to prevent players from advancing directly into the backline; they were damage sponges meant to eat hits for the boss.

However, the zombies of this ichor maze were a different breed altogether: they were all strong enough to hold their own. *Get your shit together, GM. We have two people in our party!*

Taking a closer look, all of the reanimated soldiers before us were fully equipped. While some still lacked a limb or head, their deficiencies had been shored up with the addition of a prosthetic. What was more, their weapons and armor weren't as shabby as those we'd run into prior.

Every room thus far had introduced more foes or harder riddles. The uninterrupted ascension in difficulty made it impossible not to realize the purpose this labyrinth served: it was a test of skill.

I had long since quit asking myself the questions of who and why. On our way here, we'd picked up a handful of diary scraps detailing the writer's life with his "beloved sword." The text made it amply clear that the blade was anything but morally sound.

While the motive remained less obvious, there was no mistaking the blatant trials of strength and wit. We were being observed to see how far we'd make it, and could only hope that we amounted to more than trapped rats in a lab; I prayed this game of chess had any concept of mate.

Anyone who set up an unwinnable game was the scum of the earth. I'd spent all my tabletop career readying campaigns so they wouldn't require psychic powers to clear...but sadly, this universe hadn't gotten the memo, because every single enemy I'd come across was out to end my run.

A GM's job, simply put, was to lose with style. They weren't too dissimilar to the baddies that a certain bread-faced hero from children's programming fought off on a weekly basis.

Villains pushed the hero into the corner, stressed them to their limits, and even eked out minor victories after especially excruciating fights—but at the end of it all, they were to cry about their demise as they were sent flying into the stars. The GM had infinite resources, so they obviously *could* win at any moment, but why would they?

Admittedly, balancing fights on paper-thin margins could lead to close calls that were fun, win or lose. Yet I personally believed that this judgment was one only the players had a right to make, and the GM's goal remained to be conquered. We who wove the foundations of stories wrote our scenarios to give our players a chance to play a role and enjoy our worlds.

Alas, Rhine and the globe it laid on was full of tryhards without a shred of showmanship. If I hadn't been an unbalanced character myself, I wouldn't have lasted two minutes with the kidnapper-mage or the daemons prowling that lakeside manor. Stopping to think about Helga's strength by any real metric was mind-boggling too. Even my recent run-in with the bandits on our way to Wustrow had been objectively hardcore; they'd been strong enough to hunt down caravans with professional bodyguards. I was convinced the zombies of this maze had all once been top-of-the-line warriors who'd lost their final battle to join their rotting brethren.

And how could they be anything but? They weren't NPCs being puppeted by an actor behind a screen, but players who considered themselves the protagonists of the world. They had no incentive to pull punches, and that went for whoever—or *whatever*—gave birth to this pit of ichor.

"Ha ha," I chuckled dejectedly. "This is...grand."

"Yeah, it really is," Mika agreed. "I think I can hear my heart sinking."

Six of the zombies took their places as unliving ornaments, raising their weapons in two rows to decorate the path to the back of the hall. Although there was no universal theme in their sexes, armors, or weapons, a glance was all I needed to tell that each commanded immense skill.

At the very end of their formation, the last of their ilk sat alone on a chair, resting all his weight on a sword. The man with withered bark for skin and a great white beard adorning his decaying face was the very adventurer we had

come in search of. For all the tattered rags on his person, it was apparent that his light plate armor was as well-made as it was well-worn. But more importantly, the blade he cradled in his arms was utterly damned.

The tip had been stabbed into the floor. Its black metal gleamed impossibly in the darkness, loudly announcing a presence that ought not to be. With a blade well over a meter in length, the word that came to mind was *zweihander*.

By this point, I knew better than to ask what a sixteenth-century weapon was doing here. I'd realized European historical knowledge amounted to nothing in combat when I'd seen Sir Lambert throw his might around. What was more important was how *alien* the sword was. Its onyx luster and the discomfiting engravings on its hilt summoned a pit in my stomach.

Every detail of its make spoke to inherent evil; so much so that I would be eternally indecisive if forced to choose between the sword and yesterday's tome.

"That's the root of it all... It's him." Mika spoke not to deliver me this obvious truth, but to remind himself that this was the final barrier to our freedom.

The zombie was so particular, so uniquely cursed, that I could see how it had warped space and time to generate this unholy deathtrap. I didn't want to entertain the idea that he could be just another pawn on the way to the boss.

"I'd rather not imagine anything worse than *that*," I said. "Not that I can rule the possibility out."

Of course, some dungeons brought back minor bosses as fodder for the final encounter, so it was difficult to speak with certainty.

"Come on," Mika said, "would it hurt you to be less pessimistic?"

"You can't lower your guard just because the goal's in sight," I quipped.

We exchanged our final bout of banter and stepped forward. All at once, the six undead soldiers waiting on their lord turned toward us, their weapons at the ready.

The climax had begun. I'd said what I needed to say, so all I could do was to shut up and win—I doubted I'd get a third sheet if I didn't.

[Tips] To diffuse an ichor maze, one must destroy or plunder the core upholding it.

Getting to stack buffs like someone reading off a sutra before wiping the floor with an enemy is so incredibly fun. It's too bad it feels proportionately bad to be on the receiving end.

TRPGs often included a pre-combat phase where combatants could take small preparatory actions. This could range from applying minor buffs to light repositioning—rarely, someone could start things off with an all-in sucker punch—but nothing complicated enough to take too much time.

Regardless of the details, the point remained: the climax had begun with the advantage firmly in the enemy's grasp. I was possessed by dizziness before I could even raise my sword, and the world around me distorted. By the time I caught my bearings, the two rows of three zombies had shifted into a combat formation.

Plenty of systems included skills to readjust party position before an encounter to start on the right foot, but the zombies' use of this mechanic was purely poor sportsmanship. The hall was longer than it was wide, and two lightly armored vanguards blocked us off, with heavy swordsmen ready to pounce behind them...

"H-How'd they get behind us?!" Mika shouted.

...And two of their squad had managed to wrap around to encircle us. This was getting out of hand.

"Mika, you're going to have to break your own fall!"

"What are you—whoa?!"

I immediately used a Hand to grab my partner by the nape and flung him to our left, figuring that splitting up would be preferable to enduring attacks from all sides. Mika could create walls out of typical building materials, but household timber was not meant to withstand a flurry of full-power sword swings. Removing him from the melee would make him less of a target and

safer in the long run.

Besides, it seemed like the crowd was keen on clashing blades with *me*.

“Glub glub...” Less rotten than her peers, likely due to being a more recent inclusion in their forces, a woman whose good looks had yet to decay bolted toward me from her position on the front line. Sickly black blood sputtered from her lips, and she stayed low to the ground as she readied a dagger. Her physical beauty only made the scene more morbid, and her command of all her limbs was offset by a massive gash in her thin neck.

She lunged at lightning speeds. By stretching her frame as she stepped, she made use not just of her arms, but her whole upper body, giving her short blade unbelievable reach. She’d conquered the dagger’s greatest shortcoming to turn a common, handy weapon into a virtuoso’s tool.

As she approached, a floresiensis used her shoulder as a springboard. Half skeletonized, the fellow was even lighter than his already small brethren—though perhaps that was racial insensitivity on my part—letting him float through the air like a feather. Deftly handling his curved shotel, he swung down on me from above.

From behind, I could hear the clattering of armor. The duo flanking me had a spear and greatsword, and I had no doubt they were coming straight for me; I was just grateful that Mika wasn’t their mark, with his whopping zero years of close combat experience.

The situation was rough: I was outflanked on all sides and short on mana and stamina. On paper, I was all but doomed.

But you know, I can’t help but feel a bit underestimated.

“No point in holding back now!” I yelled.

If the enemy was going to set up to their heart’s content, then I’d expend major and minor actions alike to do the same. Lightning Reflexes and Insight made it trivial to discern which attacks were the quickest or most fatal.

On top of that, I had four times as many arms as the average mensch. I would have no recourse if they came at me with truly overwhelming numbers, but this assortment of honest warriors? How could I *not* oblige by giving them

everything I had?

“Blub...”

I began by using a Hand to hammer the knee of the woman leading the charge, and adding another to slam her face into the ground once she lost her balance. While an individual Unseen Hand didn't have the strength to tear off a mensch's limbs, it was more than enough to tip someone with a wonky center of gravity.

“Grargh?!” The zombie yelped as her forward momentum turned into a passionate kiss with the floor. The impact left her head attached by a patch of skin. I'd gotten a bit lucky, but the undead categorized lost heads as light wounds; I still needed to finish her off later.

More urgently, I summoned a Hand to catch me mid-leap to intercept the incoming floresiensis. Taking his strike head-on would let him slice my neck or wrists using the curvature of his blade, so I instead knocked it away with the karambit in my offhand.

Letting go of Schutzwolfe, I grabbed his fleshless neck with my newly freed right hand. The force generated from our opposing velocities alone was enough to crack his spine; I ignored the audible splinter and hiss of pulverized bone and pushed through. I dismissed my first invisible foothold and spawned another with a twirl, flinging the floresiensis directly at the spearman's pointed weapon.

“Bull's-eye!”

The small zombie landed exactly where I'd aimed. No matter how light he was, the weight of a person was enough to push back the spear and its wielder. Furthermore, the floresiensis's struggling prevented the spearman from dislodging his ally effectively, causing the tiny fellow to slide deeper and deeper down the shaft. *Nice work. Keep it up.*

I dismissed the Hand holding me up, planting my heels on the lower back of the woman who'd been sprawled out on the floor like a splattered frog. Innumerable crackles accompanied the satisfying tactile feedback of trampling a tough object into dust. Demolishing her hips robbed her of her body's fulcrum, taking her out of the equation for the time being.

“Up, down, left, and right. Blend every angle together...” I heard Mika begin to chant in between coughs—I might have knocked the wind out of him with that throw. I felt bad, but apologies could wait: the two heavy infantry had realized we’d broken through the encirclement, and they were starting to move. I needed to deal with the others, and fast.

I’d left Schutzwolfe hanging in the air, so I recalled her for a couple of quick slices to sever the woman’s fingers. The digits squirmed like caterpillars as they finally unhanded the dagger they’d so desperately kept a grip on, offering me another sidearm for my collection.

“See this brambled steel, the symbol of denial,” Mika sang. “From here to there is hither; from there to beyond is yonder...”

Listening to my friend’s verse, I picked up the dropped dagger with an Unseen Hand as I always did. With this, I had three—er, four weapons, counting the fey knife in my left hand. For whatever reason, the karambit felt far weaker than usual.

Sensory illusion aside, I turned to face the zombie wielding the two-handed sword. He had been the only one to avoid my initial trickery, and he engaged with a cautious prod, perhaps to reduce the odds of friendly fire. I gently brushed his sword away with the blunt of my own, sliding into a blade-locked position.

“Urgh!” He was *ridiculously* strong. Our clashing blades creaked as if he had the raw power to crush steel. My bones threatened to bend and my flesh cried out in protest at the burden; the fact that he could ignore such pain was patently unfair.

Still, I wasn’t about to let this become a contest of might. I only had a bit more Strength than the average person, and I wasn’t even fully grown. I didn’t stand a chance. I had to fight smarter: I wasn’t just any old swordsman, after all.

A dull *thunk* rang out. I didn’t need to look to know it was the sound of two knives barely piercing the thin underarmor of his left armpit and right knee, because I’d been the one to send them there. No matter how herculean this zombie was, he required tendons to control his muscles, and without them, I could feel his overpowering strength ease up...

Or so I thought, only for him to lean his entire body into the back of his blade. Despite being down an arm and a leg, his thirst for victory made him willing to sacrifice himself to take me down. *Are you really dead?!*

Being squashed under the load of an adult mensch in full plate didn't tickle my fancy, so I instantly abandoned the idea of catching him. Instead, I cheated my weight to one side and pivoted around him. Although I staggered a bit, I managed to escape my predicament and left the zombie—

Oww?!

Just as I thought I'd gotten out of harm's way, a sharp pain took hold of my back. The stabbing sensation had likely come from the point of a spear. My armor had eaten the brunt of the impact, but it hurt all the same. And what was more...

"Clack clack..."

The teeth-chattering bastard had stabbed me with the floresiensis still on his spear!

I felt the small zombie bend its arms at an ungodly angle to grab hold of my collar. As the spearman pulled back his weapon, the floresiensis was freed, and he did his best to latch onto my back. His little hands scrambled for my neck, and I realized he was searching for an opening to bite into my vitals. *So this is what it feels like to star in a zombie flick.*

"You little—I'm not that easy!" I yelled.

"We are hither; you are yonder! None shall cross this fence!"

Mika completed his Mother Goose-grade singsong incantation. It paired horribly with the dreary atmosphere; I made a note to hear him sing again in a sunny field one day...and to live to do so, I needed to get rid of the stowaway angling for a free ride.

I backpedaled at full speed, sandwiching the floresiensis against a wall. Even fully matured, his kind only grew to be about a meter tall, with a structurally weak skeleton. Zombies gained strength upon resurrection—I had no clue why, but they did—but that didn't make their bones any denser. This man was already halfway to being a skeleton, and his frame was as weak as a normal

floresiensis, if not weaker.

Slamming him between muscle-backed armor and a solid wall was more than enough to get some damage in. I could feel the revolting sensation of bones mashing together with rancid flesh all across my back. The hands around my neck lost their grip, and the pancaked meat slid off me, leaving only a trail of putrid blood.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a fence rise from the ground. The wooden barricade, wrapped in barbed wire, stopped the two armored zombies in their tracks before they could get to me. The fence came to life, entangling the pair in thorny steel.

The zombies attempted to rip themselves free, but the wire only unspooled and coiled around them further. The prickly strands grew more numerous by the second, and the enemies were reduced to metal cocoons in the blink of an eye. They wouldn't be doing anything until the mana overwriting the laws of reality ran its course.

"Damn, that's scary," I mumbled. Friends as we were, I couldn't help but be disturbed by how malicious Mika's magic was. This spell was a frontliner's worst nightmare; how on earth had he come up with something that was one failed magic resistance check away from certain death?

I understood that it had only worked this perfectly because the undead were enemies of the world's own sacred order, leaving them weak to magic. But personally, the thought of being on the receiving end was terrifying, even if I could reasonably escape. I was fairly certain I'd seen something like this in a death-game thriller film.

My shudder-inducing imagination was cut short by a heavy thud. I turned to see my friend had fainted and collapsed.

"Mika?!"

No response. After parrying an attack from the remaining spearman, I saw Mika weakly wave his hand in the air. He was on his side and couldn't even open his eyes from his mana consumption migraine, but he delivered the message that he was still kicking.

His headache had to be awful: he'd conjured up the fence and wire out of scant few materials, and bound the two heavies so tightly that they couldn't move. It went without saying that using true magic to accomplish something like this was mind-bogglingly complex, and the requisite mana to execute the spell was sure to be a massive load. Mystic trump cards were not to be thrown around lightly, no matter the situation. And yet, Mika had paid the brutal price of mana exhaustion to pull out the best in his deck.

I knew how it felt to run totally dry. Once, I'd asked Lady Agrippina to watch over me as I tested my limits. Headaches had set in around the time I felt like I'd gone through half my resources, and the pain had been nigh unbearable when I'd had a quarter left. I'd stopped there, but judging from how it felt, I imagined that I would black out with a sixth or so of my total mana pool remaining.

The death that loomed at the end of total mana depletion was similar to that of the blood flowing through our veins. One couldn't simply drain all but the last drop and be fine. Magic and mages staked their very lives to fight.

Huh, putting it this way makes it sound like mahjong. Despite the irrelevant thoughts bouncing around my brain, I managed to kick up the fallen floresiensis's shotel toward the final active zombie. He instinctively batted it away, and I used the opening to sever his hands.

These zombies were strong, but they had a weakness: namely, their reflexes compelled them to act like *living* foes. Had they ignored the threat of damage in favor of dedicating everything to the attack, I would have had a much tougher time.

Dissecting a lone, disarmed zombie was as trivial as butchering a downed bird. Neither offered any resistance—though it might be fairer to say I didn't give the former any chance to try.

"All right... Time for the main dish." I flicked the blood off of Schutzwolfe, and the trusty blade gleamed back at me to say she could still go on.

The final zombie had been patiently watching the brawl from the back of the room, but finally rose in response to my words. He took the cradled sword into his hands and swung it. He handled the blade like its weight was imaginary, and the noise that followed implied that he had split the air so finely and swiftly that

no gust of wind followed.

Uh... Wait a second. Is it just me, or is he stronger than me?

Cold sweat ran down my forehead. A mere two warm-up swings was all it took for me to recognize his transcendent skill. I may have been inexperienced, but my eyes were honed enough to gauge an opponent's abilities.

All my powers of observation agreed: he was *strong*. As strong as Sir Lambert—no, stronger? The captain of the Konigstuhl Watch was ludicrously adept, but I'd never felt this sense of utter despair facing him. No, no, no, that couldn't be the case. Sir Lambert hadn't ever seriously tried to kill me, and the living always induced less dread than the unliving...right?

His overpowering aura nearly shattered my soul, but I gritted my teeth and squeezed down on my father's sword to piece it back together. This damnable labyrinth was a patchwork of mistakes without a shred of level design or balance to its name, so what did I care that a busted enemy spawned at the tail end?

I'd already known that this wasn't the kind of dungeon two preteen PCs were meant to get tossed into. My psyche had snapped in two long ago. The least I could do was pick up the scraps and use them as bludgeons.

The final husk approached with confidence; I could feel his *will* with every step. He pressed his broad blade to his forehead in prayer, in pity, and in solace.

Fine, then.

I readied myself to control this character I called myself with a hearty shout. "Bring it the *fuck* on!"

Killer GMs, be they accidental or willful, were like old friends to me—literally. What more was I to do than shout daggered expletives and roll the dice with spite?

Everything was going to be fine. It was like we'd always said: *all I have to do is crit.*

[Tips] Critical successes are miracles baked into the systems that make up a

world. The numbers vary: a twelve for a 2D6, one through five for 1D100, etc. When these rare occurrences rear their heads, camels may pass through the eyes of needles. These miraculous odds only grace those who pray for them with all their hearts.

A vision of an old friend sitting across from me at a table flashed back in my mind. “Acting first doesn’t mean anything on its own,” he’d scoffed.

I wondered: if he experienced what I was going through now, would he dare to make light of initiative again?

Our blades collided, the clang echoing around us; the flying sparks splashed our dimly lit battleground with vivid brilliance. The zombie threw around the heft of his steel with no more effort than I would with a tree branch. As I slid back from the force of our clash, I saw that he had not relaxed his guard even as I retreated.

Would it kill you to go easy on me?

Many tabletop games included an initiative system, where character initiative values determined who moved in what order, and only that. TRPGs had to be either incredibly intricate or incredibly garbage to allow more than one move per turn, and advanced content could rarely be cleaned up in a single round, sidelining the mechanic as a whole. Thinking back, that old tablemate of mine hadn’t come to many of our higher-level sessions, but he had enjoyed games with revival features like those of pro wrestling.

On the other hand, in situations where a single hit spelled certain death—like now, for example—speed was menacing in and of itself.

The deceased adventurer had beelined for me as soon as I’d shouted at him. He’d taken a normal step just like any other, but then transitioned into a slash that sent me flying.

I hadn’t seen his approach—he was just too fast, and his strike too heavy. My successful block was no coincidence, however. The crackling itch of bloodlust spilled out in spades, caressing my spine with shivers that had informed me of an impending attack. I bet that the visibly cursed sword that embodied all the evils of the world was to blame.

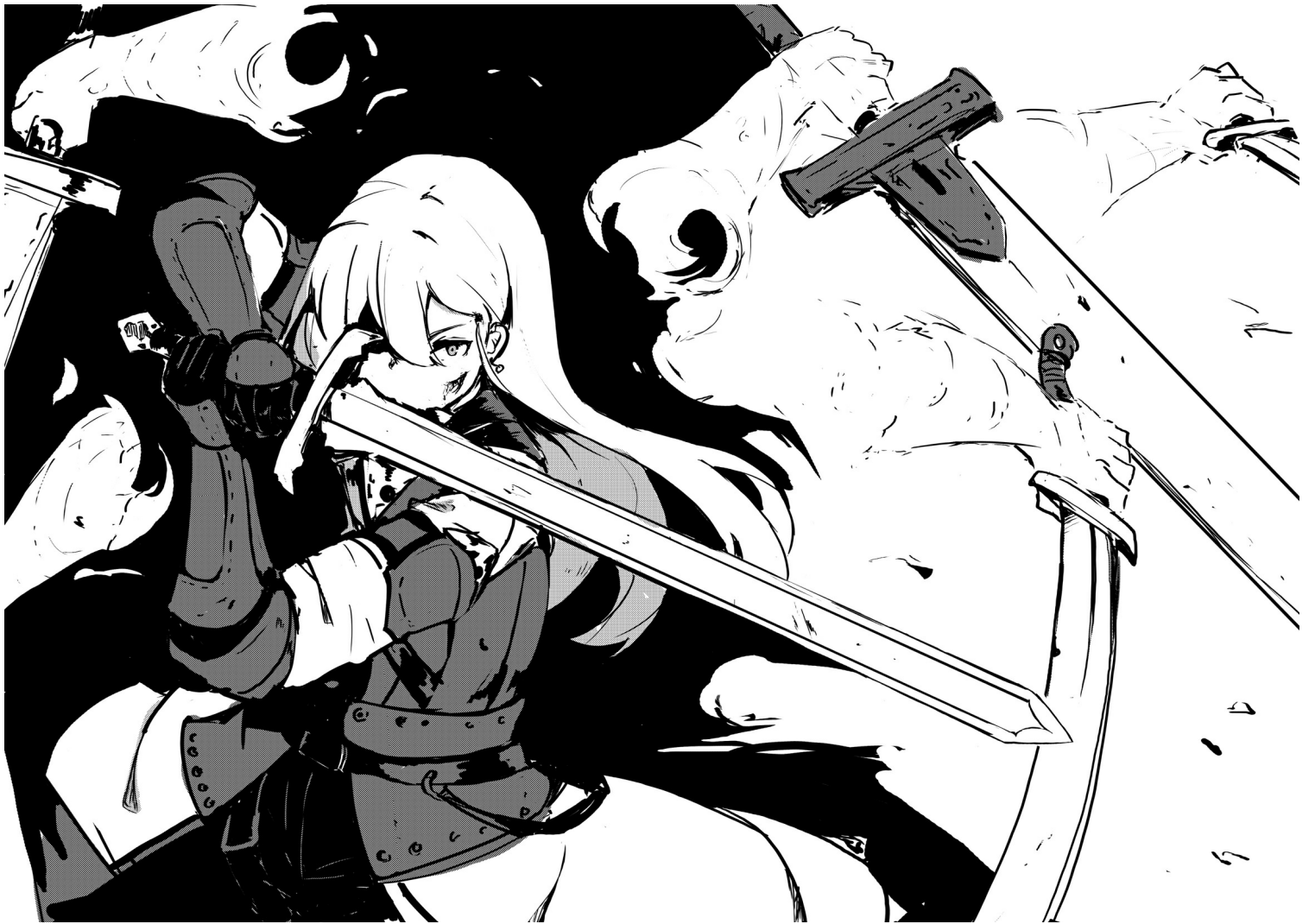
Forewarning in mind, I'd managed to shake off his attack by flinging myself back and dispelling most of the force in the air. Had I been a moment late or had Schutzwolfe been any old chunk of iron, my upper and lower body would have shared a teary farewell as my guts hit the floor; my backward momentum would have let my disemboweled corpse take a full tour of the entire room. Ironically, this blade that had been pried from the hands of her first master now served as my trusty defender.

Summoning a few layers of Hands to break my fall, I landed still holding Schutzwolfe close to my frame. I knew now that I couldn't spare any time holding back, so I began weaving spells at full throttle.

I mustered up all the mana I could to fully equip my Hands with add-ons. Reckless abandon exposed the bottom of my arcane tank: my vision flickered a dull red, some otherworldly force squeezed the front of my brain, and the dull throbbing in the back of my skull felt like I'd been kicked by a horse.

I didn't need a clear head to know my mind was complaining about overexpenditure. The body is a device that applies pain to prevent its squishy master from pushing it too hard, and we, the egos in charge, lack the grit to fight its influence. The delicious flavors of food and the ecstatic rapture of discharge all traced back to this will preceding self.

But I didn't need that right now. I stamped down the pain through sheer grit and screamed my unconscious inhibitions back into their place to finish casting my spell. Six invisible arms recovered weapons short of masters, wielding each with the proper Hybrid Sword Arts technique.



A sword, greatsword, spear, dagger, and shotel turned on the liege they once served. It was all too ironic: these weapons had been used by literal corpses, only to be brought to life once more to cut down an undead foe. I wouldn't have any retort if they were to file an overwork complaint.

Although the spear required two Hands, I'd still sextupled my forces. I could have smugly laughed about how much of an advantage this gave me against any normal opponent...but the final zombie instantaneously shifted into another attack, leaving me no time for optimism.

His takeoff tore a hole in the floor, and his landing left a crater as he sprinted toward me. I could hardly believe that this bag of skin and bones could bat away seven blades with a single powerful strike, but he did so to open a path to me.

Although the accursed zweihander was visibly unwieldy, it rushed at me like the winds of a tempest. The adventurer came down with a cross-shoulder slash, using the angular momentum to make a full turn and follow up with an uppercut. He continued his circular movements with professional precision. With every turn, he blocked my omnidirectional attacks with plates of his armor, assuming he didn't parry or dodge them outright. The mastery he'd attained over a lifetime was palpable.

Heavy weapons were held back by their mass, but this man had managed to tame the centrifugal force that came with weight. He'd quite literally dedicated his life to *this* specific blade. I'd known he was an infamous adventurer, but this technique was unliving proof. No one but an eccentric daredevil would need this style of combat. This was not the work of a soldier fighting wars between two battalions; this was a lone warrior's way of crushing any enemy, no matter how many he faced—to think I'd get a lesson from my elders in the depths of hell!

The black sword came down from above like a clap of thunder. Knowing Schutzwolfe alone would not suffice, I supplemented my defense with the other two swords, locking his weapon in place with three of my own. This should have given me ample leeway to hit his exposed body with the spear and shotel, but he pivoted around the point of contact to stop both with the blunt of his blade.

Even worse, the dagger that had been slinking around the floor to nip his ankles had snapped like a candy bar with an earth-shattering stomp.

You can't seriously be this strong! How many times are you going to dodge my guaranteed finishers?!

I let go of all my borrowed weapons, using all six freed Hands to shove him in the chest. I managed to push him back far enough to regain my footing before rebuilding my defensive wall of blades.

Meanwhile, the zombie had landed and swung his sword leisurely through empty air. He'd flung off the chipped fragments of my own, weaker steel that had been clinging to it, filling the air with a dreamy glimmer.

Glancing over at the flock of weapons that had shielded me countless times in this fight, I realized that most of their edges had been reduced to the miserable zigzag pattern of a wood saw.

The adventurer's sword was heavy, sharp, and impervious to wear; I admit that I was jealous of its stats. Of course, I wouldn't dare pick it up even if it dropped. No matter how strong that thing was, there was no doubt that the accompanying demerits would be too great to endure. I didn't want every friend or lover I had to be cut down by a cursed blade like a certain prince from a faraway land—though I supposed that was only something I could worry about if I won.

I took a moment to compose my unruly breathing and tightened my grip on Schutzwolfe. Even my deepest breaths made my shoulders sway, and my headache was only getting worse. I tasted blood with each inhalation. As I ran my tongue across my chapped lips to wet them, I was met with the disgusting sensation of slime.

Oh, dammit. The side effects of my spellcasting had triggered a nosebleed. *Is this as far as I go?*

The opposing death knight was utterly undisturbed. He did not run out of breath; he did not sway with fatigue; he was a stark machine whose sole purpose was to wield his blade. As a mensch, no amount of envy would let me attain the same kind of Exhaustion Immunity skill he had.

“Cut me some slack... This is so unfair.”

Here he comes. The untiring monster was on his way to subjugate this pitiful mortal with the brutality of overwhelming stats. His rapid rotations rained down a flurry of swings more numerous than the droplets in a rainstorm.

I dodged an overhead strike by batting away the broad side of his blade. I redirected an uppercut by blocking with the spear's handle and shifting the angle of attack. I intercepted a full-power cross slash with a bundle of swords to make space for me to get to safety.

I was still alive, but barely. Perilous blows were followed by formidable strikes, and fatal threats always came just as I ran out of breath. Every slice nicked my skin and the muscles beneath, causing red blobs to ooze from countless minor wounds. Despite it all, I couldn't help but be thankful for the blood dripping from my cheek into my mouth.

I know, I thought to myself, I'll drink some water. Once I put this guy down, I'm going to drink all the water I can. Water already tastes great after exercise, so I bet it'll be the best thing I've ever had after I survive this.

The spear broke: unable to withstand the innumerable cuts, it bent like a used toothpick when I tried to thrust it forward.

The greatsword cracked: abused as a shield for its large size, it had been crushed into an unusably crinkled mass.

The shotel snapped in two. The dagger shattered. The longsword lost its blade. At long last, the dependable legion of armaments I'd used the last of my mana to animate had all fallen.

In a poetic turn of fate, all that remained was the lonely sword in my hand. I doubted my tired, numb fingers could wield her properly, but she was all I had left.

My father's pride and joy alone had remained intact, free from fatal damage. Schutzwolfe's presence emboldened me, as if to say that this would not be enough to stop me—that I had a home to return to.

How long had this dance gone on? I liked to think I did my best. Even through all the cuts to the point where I could no longer tell where from where I was

bleeding, I managed to land a handful of hits. None caused any damage, though, as the best I'd done was chip at his rags and armor.

Man, soloing bosses really is a fool's errand.

The zombie primed his sword slowly to let me see his every move. He'd taken this exact stance many times before: this was how he prepared the exquisite cross slash he was so fond of. As I watched him rest his blade on his shoulder, ready to make his centrifugal swing, I felt a phantom pain run from my shoulder to my hip.

I see. So this is where you're aiming. If I didn't stop him, I would die.

I'd used up all my tricks and was at the end of my line, but I felt mysteriously clearheaded. My body was shot and I was bleeding for lack of mana, but it felt like I could see the world perfectly as it was—though maybe just because I'd used the last of my magic to wipe my face clean with a Hand.

Please, I haven't seen one all this time... Give me a crit. Let me see the beautiful miracle of those six little dots...because otherwise, my journey ends here.

I heard the sound of clattering dice, but it had to be a hallucination. I wouldn't be able to handle the thought of someone playing craps outside. *Shut up, it's my turn. Sit still and watch.*

I know it all rides on me. Just give me a crit. Please, just one crit...

...Ah. Damn. I'm going to die.

Comically enough, my prayer was answered not by two sixes, but by the red stare of snake eyes. In a catastrophic fumble, I slipped on my own spilled blood. As the soles of my boots lost grip, my all-in gamble of trying to take the zombie's wrists from below before he could strike had failed before I could get a chance to try.

I could scramble for balance, but in another instant, the massive blade would tear right through me. I wondered how it would feel to be cut by that sword: judging from its appearance and the fate of its owner, I reserved any expectation of a pleasant outcome.

Gods dammit, I don't care if you call me an opportunist—give me some kind of miracle!

Alas, I was the kind of unlucky soul who fumbled at the most crucial moments. In the end, my dice had landed with the unfortunate sides up.

“I’ll protect you...old pal.”

Just before I could close my eyes in resignation, I heard Mika’s voice.

The zombie had cut air itself with his speed, so why was his sword yet to reach me? What was the faint shimmer wrapping around his blade?

I had no time to search for answers. A slower strike was enough to turn certain death into a chance at life: I maintained the upward acceleration of my arm, but reversed my grip on Schutzwolfe. What had started as an uppercut became me hoisting her up at an angle, redirecting the incoming attack toward the ground beside me.

Both the slip and the impact had left me off balance, but I couldn’t let my split second of hope go. I gave everything I had to secure my footing and thrust the fey knife into the dead man’s right shoulder.

No matter how colorless the new False Moon made the karambit, its razored edge retained its physically unstoppable properties. I cut through muscle and scored bone to totally thrash the corpse’s withered shoulder. I didn’t sever it, but I didn’t need to. The undead lacked our mental faculties, but they still relied on the same physical components to move their bodies.

The adventurer’s joint could not withstand the brunt of his own attack, and the weakly connected arm gave way. The hideous sword went with it, magnificently tumbling across the room.

In a voice somewhere between snapping dried twigs and rubbing glass together, the undead adventurer uttered his final word: “Splen...did.”

[Tips] Fumbles are absolute failures baked into the systems that make up a world. The numbers vary: a two for a 2D6, ninety-six to a hundred for 1D100, etc. When these catastrophic values rear their heads, even the simplest tasks become hopeless: whether that be reciting a familiar poem, tossing trash into

a wastebasket from afar, or even *breathing*. But who knows? Perhaps a fumble may lead to a miracle yet unseen...

My master had a saying: “You may walk along the edge of impossibility, but never cross beyond.”

The reasoning went that we magia were expected to push ourselves to the brink. We caused apples to fall *up* out of trees; we prevented round objects from rolling on wet flooring; we froze papers that were already ablaze. To push the boundaries of what reality considered possible was the nature of our work.

However, to go further than that was considered improper. Bend the laws of existence too much, and the world would hit us with recoil, not to mention the potential of divine apostles being sent to hunt us down.

Furthermore, crossing that boundary to bring about magical change that exceeded one’s limits brought about a countereffect on the body that could not be endured. Whether it was to cast a spell beyond one’s skill or to tap into mana not available for use, such tasks were considered too dangerous to do...

But personally, I thought that it was fine, depending on what was to be gained. In fact, I believed that some situations came with an *obligation* to step over that line.

“I’ll protect you...old pal,” I muttered.

Terrible headaches hounded my psyche, but I pulled my jumbled thoughts and last dregs of mana together into a spell. My vision was totally red, and I couldn’t breathe out of my nose. My blood vessels were probably popping under the strain. The obnoxious sounds of liquid bouncing around my empty head likely meant my ears were bleeding too.

Despite all I’d given up for this spell, it did little to affect the world. I hadn’t even amplified my magic with an incantation, so the change I could bring about with my dwindling life force was bound to be minuscule.

The best I could do was to make the myriad of spiderwebs drooping from the walls and ceiling several times thicker for a brief moment.

Spiderwebs were known throughout the Empire as the basis for the strongest

wires that money could buy. Thread woven by nest-building arachne made the steel cables used in bridge construction look softer than silk, and clothes sewn from arachne webs were akin to armor.

So, if nothing else, these fragile webs should be able to slow down a single strike. They were just hanging off the ceiling, so I couldn't expect them to stop the sword entirely. That dark blade was sharp enough to blow away other weapons too, so I didn't know how well my plan would work. Still, I thought it was worth a try—enough that I was willing to bet my life and future on it.

Clatter. I heard something roll across wood.

Beyond the veil of blood seeping into my eyes, I saw...that my friend had won.

Gods, he's so cool. Erich was bloody and tattered, but he hadn't given up despite it all. Seeing him stand tall was inspiring. I wanted to keep watching, but my time was up. My vision swirled, as if someone had tied a rope to my head and was swinging me around.

But no matter what the cost, I was truly happy that he won.

[Tips] At times, a mage can offload the costs of a spell on their body and mind in place of using mana. Naturally, this risks damage to those very faculties.

I'd loved those battles where the whole party had used everything in the tank, all my friends were throwing for death saves, and the victor came down to one decisive roll of the dice.

Those encounters never failed to get my heart pounding, and the high of victory had always lasted long after everything had been packed up. Whenever the GM did their job of being vanquished one step shy of checkmate, I'd always been so giddy to keep going—or even to write up a whole new campaign.

But this time, my first thought after winning was *I'm never doing this again.*

I propped myself up with Schutzwolfe to overlook the remains of the final zombie. Not wanting to let him reclaim his weapon, I'd used all my remaining strength to follow up on my big opening and had just finished dismembering

him.

Sweat and blood mixed together on my chin before dripping to the floor. My body whined from being worked like there was no tomorrow, and a grating headache let me know that I had indeed bottomed out on mana. Someone had set up an ironworks factory in my brain, and they refused to turn off the rumbling engines of pain.

Had my PCs always felt this way after a battle? I'd traditionally dealt with the aftermath using a simple scene change, but now I felt guilty for glossing over their struggle.

"Mika..."

I trudged over to my unconscious friend at a snail's pace. He'd saved my life: I didn't know what exactly he'd done, but I was sure he had been the one to buy me that extra moment. Blood seeped from his every crevice—proof he'd fought alongside me all the way to the finale.

After a long struggle, I made my way to his side. I knelt down in prayer as I checked on him, and thankfully found him still breathing. His breaths ranged from shallow to deep, but I didn't hear the worrying sound of water when I put my ear to his chest, so his lungs had been spared from any injury or leakage.

I was more nervous about his head, but...fixing that was out of my league. Restorative magic was ludicrously expensive, and without any understanding of the basics, I couldn't unlock it if I tried. That then begged the question of whether it was finally time to implore the gods for their assistance, but unfortunately healing miracles did not mend wounds caused by overcasting spells.

Maybe things would have been different if we had a God of Magic to pray to, but alas, mages were nuisances who illegally modified divine source code. We were naturally at odds with the system admins in the heavens, leaving us with no deity to preside over the realm of the arcane.

I wiped him clean with a spare cloth and pressed our waterskin to his lips. I was relieved to see him drink, albeit without much vigor. While he appeared terribly pained, it didn't look like he was in any immediate danger of dying. Still, I wanted to get him to a proper iatrurge—a specialist who made their living off

the back of mystic medical treatment—to be safe. If he turned out to be slowly bleeding into his own skull, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

That said...I was out of gas myself. I slumped onto my rear beside my sleeping companion and chugged the last of our water, just as I'd promised myself in the heat of battle. I'd expected great things from this prize, but never imagined that the water would taste *this* good. The flavor was so superb that I was instantly overwhelmed with gratitude for living to experience this moment.

I guzzled it down faster than I could breathe air, only regaining my composure after I'd wrung out and savored every last drop. Whatever energy had been propping me up abandoned me, and I felt like I'd been fully stuffed with fluffy cotton. I'd need to rest before I could get anything done.

Oh, I know. I decided to make a stretcher once I recovered. Using my woodworking skills, I could probably fashion one out of nearby branches and rags. That way, I would be able to carry Mika back without rocking his head too much. Adventures were as much about the trip home as they were about the actual quest.

...But man, what was I going to do with that sword? The defeated black blade lay lifeless on the floor, right where it had fallen. It neither stirred nor cried; it was as inert as any other old sword.

However, the ichor maze was still standing. Was it still plotting something? Maybe it would go in search of a new wielder—*wait*. The word “jinx” once again made itself known in my mind.

Murphy's Law clearly states that “anything that can go wrong will go wrong.” The adage was awfully pessimistic, but unflinchingly true.

The sword suddenly began to tremble, only to float off the ground all by itself. It continued shivering midair, and then...it unleashed concentrated *idea*.

Transmission of powerful thoughts was not new: Lady Agrippina did so whenever she couldn't be bothered to flap her lips, and the words of gods that sometimes graced the sermons I'd attended were similar. Yet the raw emotion pounding into my brain was too grand, too hideous to describe in words.

The closest thing to the gut-wrenching feeling it radiated would probably be

“love.” The sword erupted, spewing the kind of affection that destroyed mortal minds as it took flight—toward me, of course.

I’d thought my throat to be unusable at this point, but I let out a deafening shriek as I rushed out a mystic countermeasure. My nothing of a mana pool dried up, and I cobbled together a spell at the cost of having my brain sanded down into raw agony.

Reality warped. The blade darting toward me at lethal speeds disappeared not into my body, but into an empty hole that led to who-knows-where. The absolute defense of space-bending magic swallowed the sword, sending it to what I imagined was an infinite nowhere.

O-Oh gods, that was close...

I leaned back against a wall and thanked the heavens that my knee-jerk response had saved me. Looking back, the sword had plunged toward me with the tip facing *away* from me. Had it been trying to get me to use it because I’d been the one to best its former master?

Give me a break. My childhood friend offered all the clingy love I could handle; I was *not* taking in a yandere cursed item. I wasn’t greedy enough to ask for a holy sword of legend or one that could take human form with a personality of its own, but, I mean...couldn’t I ask for something a teensy bit more heroic?!

Getting mentally worked up kicked in the delayed aftereffects of the spell. My brain was in a mincer, carefully being ground up for the rest of eternity. Apparently, casting costly space-bending magic when I was already totally spent had crossed the line.

The world spun around and around, as if reality was melting—wait, no, this wasn’t a hallucination. The ichor maze was dissipating: the wall I’d been resting on fizzled away, and I could feel myself falling. I landed with my nose stuck on something soft that smelled of iron.

Amidst the discordant grating of everything falling apart, I could hear something else: a heartbeat. The gentle thumps came quietly, but with certainty. Mika was the only one here besides me, meaning I was using my injured friend’s chest as a pillow.

Not that I could do anything about it. I couldn't so much as twitch my fingers, and my mind was too preoccupied with the sensation of being churned up from the inside to think straight.

Augh... Jeez, it's been a rough adventure.

[Tips] Upon losing its core, an ichor maze will return to its original form. As the world corrects its distorted features, it takes the abnormalities the labyrinth caused with it. All that remains are the heroes who conquered the trials within.

"I don't recognize this ceiling." As hackneyed as the trope was, I couldn't help but indulge myself with these words when I awoke. Aches of both the muscle and head varieties held the reins, but I whipped myself into sitting up anyway.

Looking around, I found myself in a small hut. The cabin's wood was crumbling in a way that betrayed its age, and the plainness of the abandoned bed, stove, and desk spoke to the prior inhabitant's frugality.

It appeared my assumptions about the dungeon had been correct: the ichor maze had been a distortion of the adventurer's forest hideaway, and the core had been the atrocious sword he'd held so dear. That meant the mummified man who'd been cradling the obsidian blade had been the owner of this shack, and more pertinently, the author of the weathered memoirs scattered on top of the writing desk.

"...But there's something else I have to do first."

Pressing a hand to my throbbing temple, I glanced over at my comatose friend. Mika showed no signs of waking anytime soon, and I figured he'd be better off borrowing the bed until he did. The cot was ancient, but it didn't seem to pose any risk of collapsing, and the sheets were free of rot.

Fortunately, it didn't seem like there were any enemies around. We weren't in the kind of game that constantly threw Tokyo into peril, refusing to deliver its heroes from hell just because the boss had fallen. Perhaps the lesser zombies had been caught up in the structural collapse of the ichor maze, because I didn't sense a thing.

Whatever the case, I was happy to have a moment to rest. I scooped Mika up into my arms—there wasn't a chance I had enough energy to use an Unseen Hand—and laid him out on the bed. He was shockingly light, but I pushed my recurring surprise at his fragility out of my mind along with the desire to lay down and sleep next to him.

Instead, I pulled out the chair by the desk and sat down. I didn't sense anything around us, but that was no guarantee the zombies weren't still out there. I had to remain vigilant until the very end—or at least until Mika woke up to trade shifts with me.

Until then...the quest objective was right here. Who had the right to deny me a period of rest to sample the fruits of our labor before turning it all in?

I picked up the timeworn stack of sheets. The weight in my hand felt like an unspeakable measure of achievement given physical form.

We had won: we'd finished our quest and lived to tell the tale. One day, this might become just another past session, buried in our memories to the point where we could no longer remember what we'd gained from the experience.

And yet the fulfillment I felt now was real. I'd just finished saying I would never do this again, but curiously enough, this contentment made me think it might not be so bad. We mortals truly did abandon prayer as soon as we washed onto shore—going so far as to forget what we left behind in the treacherous ocean.

Well, whatever. Even the Buddha had taken the time to be pleased with his own accomplishments. I was but a pauper steeped in worldly desire; letting myself indulge in my own triumphs every now and again was hardly going to make me stray off the path of an upstanding human.

Let me have this moment. If scars were prized honors, then the pain I felt now was worthy of a glorious toast.

[Tips] Whether caused by eons of accumulating evil or triggered by a powerful curse, the site of a corrected ichor maze will regain its original form.

Postface

Ending

The terminal point of a session. Combat alone is not the end all be all, and players must return alive to complete their tale. At times, those who exceed their limits may fail to join their companions on the journey home...but that, too, is part of adventure.

“Wow... What a riveting saga! Please, write an epic poem of your tale.”

“I’m afraid I lack the skill in both meter and instrument to oblige.”

In contrast to Sir Feige’s uncharacteristically childlike enthusiasm, it took everything I had to not let my shriveling spirit show. It had slipped my mind that my story would speak so plainly to this gentleman’s tastes.

Two days had passed since then (it’d taken a full day just to recoup the energy needed to move), and we’d finally made it back to Wustrow. We could have called for help with Mika’s familiar—which had been anxiously waiting for its master’s return, judging from how obnoxiously loud its cawing was upon reunion—but I’d figured it would be faster to head back on our own seeing as we could walk, even if barely.

Our trip home had started with both of us being overly worried for the other, and at some point our conversation had devolved into a war of praise that left us both as red-cheeked as a couple of tomatoes. I’ll spare you the details; neither Mika nor I were keen on thinking back on the occasion, and we’d need to find a pillow to punch in ten years or so whenever the memory came back to haunt us.

Oh, and it was worth mentioning that the classic GM malice of unreasonable random encounters being placed on the road to safety had been absent. Despite my fears, none of the zombies could be found in the area—I wasn’t a fan of the large number of missing persons we’d lost, but alas—and no random

event had come to wipe us out after the quest objective was in hand.

At any rate, I now found myself in Sir Feige's office. Mika was still enduring headaches and numbness that spread all across his body, so I'd left him at the inn while I came to turn in our quest and ask to be introduced to a skilled iatrurge.

Medicine alone was already expensive, so it went without saying that a diagnosis from a professional healer cost an exorbitant sum. The real problem lay with how many iatrurges turned away any and all first-time customers.

None of the specialists of this world were willing to sell their services for any less than they were worth. Their professions were how they put bread on the table; with how quickly life could end at any given moment, I couldn't fault them for not wanting to cheapen their own livelihoods.

Even amongst magia—and I mean *magia*, not mages—iatrurgy was a highly specialized craft, and its practitioners could afford to choose their clientele. Part of this stemmed from how wasteful it would be to entertain every random citizen wanting to cure their back pain, but the College also required its iatrurges to seek permission before using the most intricate curative spells.

When lost limbs could be readily replaced, a certain amount of discretion was in order. There was little a healer could do when a pauper knocked on their door.

As a result, I thought explaining Mika's situation to a local figure of authority was the best way of receiving help. After laying out our entire story, the treant took a moment to think.

"Hrm, I would have never suspected such diabolic things to be going on in those woods without my knowing." The old tree stroked his thick, mossy beard and sat up in his chair. "Come to think of it, I've heard many stories of missing hunters, travelers, and even caravans around here as of late. Still, I never would have considered the cause to be an ichor maze—I'll need to pen a letter to the lord."

"...You're not going to doubt me?" I asked. While the local lord should have been the one to handle this issue, I found it bizarre that Sir Feige was willing to bring up such unpleasant news all on my word.

Take a moment to think about it: I was a literal *child* working as a College researcher's indentured servant. Why would anybody believe such an outlandish story from an unproven "adventurer" like me? Even more mysteriously, the scrivener was not simply playing along to please an imaginative boy—he'd brought out high-quality paper to write a letter with.

I know I'd been the one to shamelessly report my experiences, but I expected him to distrust me more.

"Hrm... I see you take me for nothing more than an old hunk of bark," Sir Feige said with a playful smile. "How could I not know the truth, with this dense mana still strewn all about you? The countryside isn't as well-kept as the Empire's center, but a normal stroll would never bring this much pollution with it."

His scarab-like eyes converged on me with a gleam. As a mensch, I could never hope to see the same world as this living pseudo-spirit, and the treant had evidently picked up on something I'd missed.

"Furthermore, you told your tale without hesitation. When you stopped, it was clearly to remember and not to *think*." The gentleman laughed heartily and offered me a cup of tea. "Come, you must be thirsty after such an earnest oration."

I was utterly humbled. With about fifty years of total life under my belt, I was intimately familiar with how one was to get on in the world—or at least, I'd thought so.

This proved that such supposition was pure fantasy: Sir Feige had gleaned the whole of the situation from my speech, and yet I'd doubted his understanding without realizing that I'd been seen through. I hadn't bothered lying because I didn't need to, but didn't realize until being told so that that in and of itself helped validate my claims.

"I am profoundly ashamed of the terrible immaturity I've displayed," I said.

"Nothing to fret over, little one. You're still young. I may look all withered up, but my age isn't just for show."

As he laughed and scrawled on the parchment, my mind was stuck on a single

thought: *I'm so sorry for being an old man on the inside...*

“Here, I’ve thrown together a letter of introduction to a healer I know. Critical mana loss can cause blood to pool in the brain, so it’s best to hurry.”

“Thank you very much! My friend will be able to rest easy now.”

Despite how far we were from a major city, the iatrurge was apparently skilled enough to earn Sir Feige’s approval, so that was one worry off my shoulders. All that was left was to accept the treant’s kindness by heading straight for the doctor’s office. I wanted them to look at Mika as soon as possible.

“Indeed,” Sir Feige went on. “As ignorant as I was, I had been the one to march you into the jaws of death. Don’t worry about the cost of treatment.”

I couldn’t be more thankful. Mika and I had saved up some money by cutting corners, but I had been worried; I didn’t know how much arcane medical treatment would cost. (I would find out later that that line of work saw gold coins tossed about for every little thing.) I’d come out here to gather extra cash for my future, so taking on an entirely new debt would be a cruel twist of fate.

As I tried to push myself to my feet, Sir Feige put a hand on my lap to stop me. With a great big sigh, he said, “Just so I’m clear, that letter is for the *both* of you.”

“What?”

Sir Feige and I stared at each other in silence for a few seconds in a total breakdown of communication.

“The flow of energy in your body is haywire,” he explained. “Mana is surging every which way—a typical symptom of arcane trauma.”

The treant’s eyes saw me as worthy of hospitalization myself, and apparently I was better suited to resting in bed than coming to report to him in person. And here I’d thought being able to move was evidence of health...

“Why do you find it so hard to care for yourself as much as you do your friend?” Sir Feige put a hand to his temple and shook his head in unmitigated disappointment. Without forewarning, the floor, walls, and ceiling reached out

and instantly ensnared me in wooden tendrils.

“Whoa?!”

My limbs were completely trapped. I couldn’t move a muscle: not only were the restraints tough, but they were smartly placed to block the movement of my shoulders, knees, hips, and other major joints.

“You need as much rest as your friend...and you’ll get it whether you like it or not.”

Of course, I realized. Treants were said to be one and the same with the mother tree they emerged from. This entire workshop was part of Sir Feige’s person.

“And feel free to expect great rewards. I shall arrange for everything to work in your favor. Taking advantage of old coots with more years than good sense is a privilege of youth, you know.”

It only took another moment for Sir Feige’s remarkably potent—and inescapable—goodwill to rob me of consciousness.

[Tips] The deadliest wounds are the hardest to spot. This truth applies to any who lack the luxury of a status window.

A light headache and bodily discomfort roused me from my sleep.

“...I’m alive. Thank the gods.”

I opened my eyes to a tall ceiling with countless medicinal herbs hanging from it. The sheets and blankets enfolding me were neatly kept, and taking a light breath brought the smell of incense to tickle my nostrils. As I exhaled, the scented air brought with it memories of the physician in my homeland.

Yesterday, an alarmed iatrurge had forced all manner of drugs down my throat—and boy, had they tasted terrible—before dragging me to bed in this aromatic room. The blanket had a different design than I remembered, though, so I’d likely been asleep for several days.

I turned to my side to see my friend Erich in the same circumstances,

although he'd been tucked in far more securely. He wouldn't stay put no matter what he was told, so the doctor had tied him to his bed. I felt bad for him, but something about the situation tickled me greatly.

Yet put another way, our cases were severe enough to warrant this kind of treatment. I was so, so happy that I'd woken up. My master had told me so many tales of magia falling apart at the seams from undue strain. Some died; others grew senile; none found a happy ending... Even mustering all the courage I had, I had still been scared.

When the healer was diagnosing me, I'd been on the brink of tears. I hadn't been afraid to give my life to save my friend on the cusp of death. But once we'd made our way to safety and I began thinking about the fun times we'd share going forward, the fear set in all at once.

Maybe I really am going to die, I'd thought. That alone frightened me to the point of tears.

But I was alive. I was also free of pain, save for a headache that had overstayed its welcome, and that too was much more bearable than before. Before sleeping, it had felt like someone had stuck red hot tongs into my eye sockets to melt my brain from inside out. My body felt—*wait, what?*

My coughing sounded higher in pitch than usual, and the discomfort that had triggered my awakening once again took hold of me. Curiously, I ran a hand across my frame to make a surprising discovery: I had a chest.

Er, well, I'd always had a chest, of course, but, I mean, you know... I had a *chest*—in the go-shopping-for-new-undergarments sense.

Faint as it was, I knew my own body. There was a bulge that hadn't been there when I'd been sexless. I pressed my hand against it to find that the exterior was peculiarly elastic, with a more solid inner core. The unfamiliar sensation registered in my mind as a light pain.

My parents had once told me that psychological shock could sometimes trigger our transformations: the loss of a loved one, societal upheaval, or something more personal. My mother—our kind gendered our parents' titles by who had given birth—had jokingly said it would happen at first love; my father had jokingly said it would happen when I risked my life on something...but

really?

I was surprised at my physical changes, but quickly accepted them without any trouble. From a magus's perspective, this seemed perfectly explicable. Bodily change was a natural facet of life to us tivisco; our brains came built to handle this sort of thing.

I would need to check on my lower half later. Between sexes, my kind only had a small waste outlet on otherwise smooth skin. The shift in physique demanded a different way of picking flowers, not to mention everything else that would change...

I wonder what Erich will think of me.

Would he accept me like he had that night? Or would he... No, it wasn't good to indulge in fantasy. I'd already promised to protect him as his friend.

I just needed to do my best to be the old chum by his side. To that end, maybe this strange body could turn into an advantage.

My parents had long been puzzled by romantic relations in our canton. They defined boundaries between men and women, and those very boundaries were what repelled and attracted. My parents said that the reason mensch couples argued so much was because neither half of a pair knew what it was like to be the other.

As a tivisco, I could be either. When my male shift came, I would come to know Erich better than I did now. There were some things he could only say to boys and others only to girls; he would be able to say anything to me. Surely, I would become his closest friend.

Perhaps this body wasn't all that bad. I couldn't be the princess in the castle that the minstrels sang of, nor was I anything close to the hero, his sword sweeping majestically. However, they alone could not fill a saga. They needed the bridge-building mage, the waitress who filled their bellies, and the friend who cheered the hero in his darkest hour. Only then could his blade strike true and fell the dragon.

I wouldn't ever be the princess or the hero, but I was happy to leave that to him. Of course, that was too mortifying to put into words. I couldn't bring

myself to call him my gallant knight, even if I filtered it through our usual act.

Oh, the sun is coming up. With the landscape brightening outside, I rose out of bed. I knew I might get scolded for running off on my own, but I couldn't help it.

The flowers aren't going to pick themselves.

[Tips] Values pertaining to love, marriage, and fidelity vary wildly by race. Actions that are taken for granted by one group often cause others to cock their heads in confusion, especially in the multicultural Trialist Empire.



One Full Henderson

Ver0.3

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

Some things change with one's duties;
some never change at all.

The tale that follows is not from the time line we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

One Full Henderson ver0.3

1.0 Hendersons

A derailment significant enough to prevent the party from reaching the intended ending.

Some things change with one's duties; some never change at all.

"Master!"

The door to a tiny, neatly kept office burst open with more force than a government-sponsored drug bust with a young girl's shout. Her almond eyes overflowed with indomitable spirit, and her wheat-blond hair was set back with a simple headband. She looked about ten, but her impeccable palatial dialect pointed to a thorough education.

Mystic light shone through the doorway. The walls were buried in countless rows of beautifully bound books, but their owner was nowhere to be found. A half-written letter, an unfinished treatise, and several memos annotated beyond legibility. The loyal belongings had all remained at their post; their master alone had disappeared.

No, that wasn't *quite* correct: an arcane hearth cut off the wall of bookshelves, and the timeworn sword that always hung above it was gone.

In its stead, a long, beautiful staff adorned with gorgeous gems had been left leaning against the fireplace. It seemed bored there, all alone, and the girl felt as though she could hear it say, "Sorry, it's the usual."

The sword had long since been sheathed, and there was only one reason for its absence. Knowing exactly what that reason was, the young visitor took in a deep breath, storing all the air in her stomach...before throwing down her wand and screaming at the top of her lungs.

"*Another* adventure?! You failure of a professor!"

A few minutes later, the robe-clad College student picked up her wand. She huffed and puffed her way to the elevator down to the castle's entrance.

"Look who it is. What has you so upset? It's a shame to be so angry with that cute little face of yours."

"Huh? Oh, Professor Sponheim!"

The girl turned to see a living specimen plucked straight out of a museum of mensch beauty. The professor's elegant figure and gentle smile were bewitchingly androgynous, as confusing as they were captivating.

Their wavy, pitch-black hair paired well with their large amber marbles that overflowed with kindness. While the bridge of their nose had a masculine toughness, the shimmering gloss of their lips was that of a maiden's: their contralto voice was charming enough to make a blushing fool of anyone.

The magus was better suited to dancing in a fancy ballroom than walking around in drab robes with arcane catalysts dangling everywhere. In fact, their nickname throughout the College was The Darling Professor, though in no small part out of jealousy.

Mika von Sponheim was a prodigy, having ascended to professorship at the age of twenty-four and earning a name for themselves as a master of urban planning. Tivisco were a recent addition to the Empire, and Sponheim was the first magus of their kind. Especially popular with the largest faction within the School of First Light, the magus was regularly invited to cadre assemblies despite still being in their twenties. Aspiring magia looked up to the genius with great reverence, and many were awestruck if they so much as spoke to them.

"Remember not to kick your robe as you walk," Sponheim warned. "This castle is full of gossipers."

Scolded by the inexpressibly gorgeous professor, the apprentice mage shyly straightened the hem of her robe. Robes were an emblem of the elite magia, but they were so long that normal wear would cause them to track mud after a few paces. To don the symbol of status without allowing it to be sullied spoke to one's standing.

The thought of a magus being too overwhelmed to protect their clothing from

filth was so undesirable that “Your robe is stained” had become a stereotypical insult within Krahenschanze. Yet the girl’s anger had been so irrepressible that she’d forgotten this critical rule of conduct.

The tivisco watched her bashfully fix her attire and flashed her a smile akin to a blossoming flower. “Him again?”

“That’s right!” she exclaimed. “Professor Leizniz is calling for him, but my dumb master is harder to catch than a stringless kite! He promised to teach me today too!”

The student stamped her foot as she complained about her master, Sir Vagabond—or so the moniker went.

Erich von Dalberg was the School of Daybreak’s top polemurge and a great authority on phantasmal research; he was also one of the biggest troublemakers in a cadre already famous for causing trouble.

To begin with, he inherited a great deal of negative renown from his direct master: the infamous Agrippina du Stahl, who herself had been awarded her long-awaited professorship ten years ago—though she had seemed horrendously displeased during the ceremony.

Furthermore, his notably short temper whenever his sister Elisa von Romhild was concerned had caused no shortage of incidents. At times, he’d claimed that another’s gestures and flirtations were, quote, “ungentlemanly.” When a magus had once asked Romhild to cooperate for a study on changelings, he’d interrogated the poor soul on what the research entailed. And of course, it went without saying that the moron who’d claimed “dirty mixed bloods shouldn’t walk the same halls as us” hadn’t gotten away unscathed.

Any mention of his sister threatened to bring the broad-minded professor’s boiling point down to absolute zero; every time, his glove flew into the offender’s face—though proper etiquette was to throw it at their feet—faster than a whistling arrow.

Dalberg’s storied dueling record had brought more men to their knees than one could count on their fingers and toes. As of late, people had counterintuitively begun picking fights with him just to show their strength in a public setting. A normal magus would reprimand such an idiotic pretense for

combat, but the lunatic invariably accepted their challenges with a smile; according to him, it was good to see the young ones so lively.

Furthermore, he was the exact opposite of the cooped-up recluse he called a mentor. His wanderlust was no mere love of travel; otherwise, his fellow magia would not so derisively refer to Sir Vagabond as they did.

When a new phantasmal entity was discovered in the west, he flew from his office to sketch it. When he heard news of pre-imperial ruins in the north, he vanished to secure historical artifacts. When the wreck of a sunken treasure vessel was found in the south, he threw all his plans out the window. When a new ichor maze popped up in the east, he teleported away without a moment's delay. The so-called professor wasn't just light on his feet; he was practically an *adventurer*.

It was a feat for him to spend two total months out of the whole year in Berylin. He attended obligatory lectures with farsight and familiars, and held all of his own with thought transfers and telekinetic blackboards. The College couldn't sack him when he fulfilled all his responsibilities, but magia from every sect wondered why he didn't just quit and become a full-time adventurer.

What was worse, his connections at the top made him impossible to snuff out politically. Although he rarely participated in noble power games, he famously drove anyone who opposed him into the dirt.

On top of that, if he took a liking to another magus—whether professor or student—he was liable to whisk them away on one of his lengthy adventures on a whim, further angering their superiors and fellow researchers.

Despite their many professional research obligations, Professor Sponheim was one of the usual (willing) victims. Naturally, all those who relied on the tivisco for their work absolutely abhorred Dalberg and his antics. Unfortunately, those he spirited away always seemed eager about the journey, and their support of Sir Vagabond only made the situation harder to deal with...

Why, then, you may ask, did these disgruntled professors not conspire together to overpower his political protections? Alas, Dalberg's contributions to the field of magic were undoubtedly substantial; to expel him would lead to no shortage of academic issues.

Then why not simply kill him, you say. As previously mentioned, the battle junkie had no losses on his record, and was well regarded as a Daybreak polemurge, making this next to impossible.

The previous emperor had paved a large road to facilitate eastern trade, and one of the small nations adjacent to it had risen up against the Empire not too long ago. Dalberg had been tossed into the fray as the initial imperial response, and his work was unforgettable.

He'd posted up just in front of the enemy capital and used a homebrewed spell to reduce the area to a desert of glass; all that had remained were hot cinders raining back down to the cracked earth. Afterwards, he'd said, "Give me your leader's head or the capital is next," and that was it for the rebellion. He'd received a medal directly from the Emperor for his accomplishments, and those who witnessed his might spoke of the Ashbringer with fear and awe.

Dalberg had never lost a fair fight and could bring down a small country with raw power. To add insult to injury, he used forgotten space-bending magic to hop around to his heart's content, and also as an impenetrable shield. When those who plotted his death asked "How do we even kill this *thing*?" they were forced to give up for a lack of solutions.

As a result, Erich von Dalberg had become one of the untouchables of the Imperial College of Magic. People spoke of him like they did an elf, warning others not to draw his attention lest he spirit them away—though perhaps that was a sarcastic jab at how his fellow professor-*cum*-sister followed him around like an assistant.

"Ah..." Sponheim said. "Well, don't worry. I'm sure he'll come home right away this time. I haven't heard anything, and Miss Romhild is holding her opening lecture today. If he's running away from Lady Leizniz, then he'll be back within the month."

"Why does he have to run from the dean of our own cadre? She's so nice! Professor Leizniz even gives me pretty clothes. I don't get it!"

Mika von Sponheim had all the intellect needed to become a professor, but they were at a loss for what to say to the young girl. Explaining that a man nearing thirty would rather abandon his apprentice than let his dean dress him

up was easy, but ruining their best friend's master-disciple relationship simply wasn't an option...

[Tips] Professorship is the highest rank a magus can achieve. One must prove their own worth through publications and experiments before even being considered for the title. After a council of senior professors reviews their exploits, the especially noteworthy are granted unigenerational noble titles.

Bumping along on a rickety wagon with my woefully underused sword in hand always perked me up: *this* was the feeling of adventure.

"Thank you so much, sir. We'll make it to our destination yet with a College professor by our side!"

"No, no, I should be the one thanking you," I said. "You have no idea how grateful I am that you made space for me on such short notice."

My host was a bald dvergar with a thick beard. He was the leader of a small caravan, and I'd caught hold of him just as they were leaving the capital. I didn't see any mages or magia accompanying them, so they must have been bracing for a most unpleasant trip—hence his excitement to have me tag along.

"I'm so sorry about the rough accommodations," he said. "Please, feel free to relax and take a moment to gaze at the sky."

"I think I'll take you up on that offer," I said. "But if the time comes when my meager magic might be useful, don't hesitate to call on me."

I rolled onto my back and watched the wonderful weather. It would already be a waste to coop myself up in the College on a day like this, and playing fashion model with a pervert would shatter my mind. What was her deal, anyway? I was a grown man nearing thirty—nothing about me should have lined up in her strike zone...

I set all that aside and stretched my whole body, trembling from the unspeakable sensation of liberty. My life had been a hectic one: I'd thought to start my adventures after earning a foothold in society, but I never would have

imagined this line of work to be so obnoxious. I wanted to go back in time and tell myself, “Take a moment to see how fervently your clever master resists promotion.”

Recently, I’d spent two weeks rummaging through the forbidden book vault at my master’s request, fighting off literal literary monsters and terrible curses leaking from ungodly tomes.

As soon as I’d finished, my antisocial sister came crying to me, saying, “Dear Brother, help me prepare for my lecture! I don’t want to be in the big lecture hall! I can’t be in a room with *hundreds* of people!” Getting everything sorted out for her had taken three days.

Just as I thought I was done, Mika had swung by and said, “I’m going to the next banquet as a woman, so would you mind being my escort?” Of course, she hadn’t told me that the banquet-slash-research-event was a five-day affair.

The gaudy limelight wasn’t for me. Where was the fun in making a battlefield of a night of drinks with the cohort, coating our tongues with sugared words and venomous implications? I admit that galas offer prime opportunities to secure research funding, but I’d stood out a bit too much in battle, and my potential patrons only seemed interested in sponsoring dangerous experiments as of late.

Honestly, I understood that Mika was tired of shooing away every suitor, but I would very much appreciate being relieved of my post as shield. In fact, they’d gone agender again mid-event, so I hadn’t known how to follow up when they’d continued acting out a feminine role for the remainder of the feasts.

Still, I didn’t have any mind to refuse when my best friend needed help; rescuing my little sister in her time of need was obviously a given; I took advantage of Master Agrippina as much as she did me, so I was willing to do her bidding every now and again. But Lady Leizniz? Absolutely not.

My recent struggles could have filled *several* long-form campaigns, and surrendering myself to a two-hundred-year-old wraith with a dress-up fetish immediately after was unthinkable. *Of course* I’d run. I don’t think my soul could take it if I’d stayed. That maniac was getting *more* deranged as time went on, and frankly, she scared me.

“Promotions aren’t all they’re cracked up to be...”

“What was that? Do you need something, sir?”

“No, sorry. Don’t mind me.”

They paid me fifteen hundred drachmae a year, made me a noble, and gave me fancy titles, but *this* was the reality of the situation. Had I known the Imperial College to be a nest of unglued weirdos where sensible professors like myself were tossed around like gofers, I would have stayed a researcher. “Think of how incredible it’ll be to become a professor at twenty-four!” Mika had said. “Let’s do our best together!” they’d said. I should never have turned in that thesis...

I couldn’t believe that a simple adventure like this had become so hard to come by. Nowadays, I even had an apprentice of my own, making it all the harder to go off in search of fun. She was still too green to bring along, after all.

My meandering thoughts were interrupted by a paper butterfly fluttering out of a tear in space. I’d stolen Master Agrippina’s *modus operandi* wholesale to send a letter to my hometown. Of course, the message had gone to none other than...

“Good, Margit’s free. Staying at a hot spring inn alone would be so boring.”

Thankfully, the hunting season had yet to begin, and my childhood friend’s schedule was open. I’d introduced her to a noble house who’d put her in charge of prestigious grounds that kept her horrifically busy. I hoped that this would be the perfect way to help her unwind.

Oh, I know. Once I arrived at the inn and ironed out the waypoint marking, I’d bring over my whole family to enjoy the hot springs. My Hands would clean up all their chores in no time, so I figured it wouldn’t be too difficult to make time for them to come.

This was perfect: I’d left the College to visit and nurse my ailing family. My father, you see, developed...intense lower back pain, and my mother had...let’s say *nerve issues*, just for shits and giggles. Soaking in a hot bath would be exactly what the doctor ordered, and who could blame a child for rushing to their ill parents’ side?

While we were there, Margit and I could stop by the local adventurer's guild and scope out the work. If they had difficult quests gathering dust, we could clean those up and I could write off more of my trip as fieldwork. Mika would probably be free by the time we finished up at the hot springs, so I could call them over too.

For the first time in quite a while, I had a chance to enjoy my *real* job. Master Agrippina would scold me when I got home, to say nothing of Lady Leizniz's crying, but I was going to ignore it all anyway. I couldn't waste time with them; I had my apprentice's education to attend to.

Speaking of which, I needed to send her an apology before I forgot—and why not drag her to the inn while I was at it? Seeing new sights, experiencing new things, and learning to be curious at a young age were key to becoming a sensible adult. Besides, I didn't want her to lose her mind on contact with bourgeois cuisine later in life; I needed to acclimate her to classy cuisine now. All in the name of education, mind you.

I blissfully swung my shoulders, savoring the lack of burdens placed on them, and began to plot our adventure.

[Tips] College professors are allowed to hold other posts, but their innumerable responsibilities make secondary jobs difficult to maintain.

Sir Vagabond is a perfectionist who personally collects his samples of phantasmal creatures, and even goes so far as to stuff them as taxidermic aids. As a result, his lectures are highly regarded by those in his field, with his lectures boasting impressive attendance rates.

The girl was a College student. She had a name, but wasn't very fond of it: as the youngest, it was plainly obvious that little thought had gone into her given name, and her uncaring parents' family name was just as detestable.

That said, she didn't like it when her master playfully called her "my little lady" either. That was embarrassing, and she was only two years out from adulthood! Teasing a nearly grown woman as "little" was rather uncouth, she thought.

Upset, the girl sighed and sat at a work desk she found too good for herself. In fact, the same could be said of everything around her. These apprentice's quarters were fit for an empress, and no matter how many times the girl refused, Lady Leizniz sent her more and more splendid clothes to put in her stuffed wardrobe.

Her hair was too muddy to call golden; her face was littered with freckles; her dark eyes were closer to black than a shimmering blue; her frame was thin and without curves; her features were a far cry from anything she could consider cute.

As she stared at the desk she had so excitedly prepared for a lesson, she began to wonder why her master had chosen her at all. Her mind drifted to the memory of a cold day...

Noble as they were, the girl's house was destitute; so much so that a wealthy merchant was sure to surpass them in every way.

Three generations ago, the patriarch had gambled on a failing business venture. Two generations ago, the family head had been driven out of his aristocratic clique. Alone, the last generation's leader had staked everything on winning glory in the previous emperor's eastern conquest, only to fall to a stray arrow. Out of heirs, the house went to the man's uncle—the girl's father—who was inept at all things political.

One day, the girl grew old enough to warrant debuting in high society, and was taken to a banquet hosted by some nobleman or another. Yet her father had no interest in his unplanned youngest: her clothes were visibly cheap and he disappeared after half-heartedly introducing her to a few other guests.

Her father shamelessly begged and pleaded for loans to restore their house. The girl's bargain threads were too thin for the weather, and a terrible melancholy set in as she watched him with a thousand-yard stare.

No one dared speak to her; they could see she was an unloved daughter from a crumbling family. The greater part of highborn behavior was dictated by calculation, and none were willing to spend their valuable time with someone who carried all risk and no reward. Even the head of her household was stonewalled by fake smiles. "Another time," they all said. The girl knew that

time would never come.

Although she knew he didn't love her, her father was still her father. She couldn't bear to see him beg so desperately. Outcast and unwanted, the girl's heart was full of shame and the desire to go home.

Even worse, the girl had recently been plagued with chest pains. While she didn't know whether it was an illness or simply the effects of unbridled cold, she did know that the burning sensation in her heart would be followed by a stinging headache behind her eyes. She had spent countless nights sobbing in bed, praying for a way to make it stop—though of course, it never did.

The pain had made another appearance on the night of the banquet. The girl's heartbeat had begun to quicken, and she had started gasping for air. In two hours or so, the headaches would come, and they would be unbearable an hour after that. But she knew her family couldn't afford an iatruge; all she could do was keep still and suffer.

The girl wanted nothing more than to go home...until a slip of paper came into view. Stunned by its sudden appearance, the girl blinked in confusion, only for the parchment to begin folding in on itself. After a long, intricate process, the flat sheet had become a snow-white rose.

“Wow!”

For the first time in ages, the girl smiled. The flower was so beautiful that she could hardly believe it came from one piece of paper—and she'd seen its creation! Her shimmering eyes were glued to the papercraft and the oddly calloused hand it rested on. In fact, she didn't so much as glance at the person holding it until he spoke...

“Do you like it?”

...and he was beautiful. His hair was braided in the back like a golden crown. The girl's mother had a prized sapphire stashed away in her jewelry chest, but it couldn't hold a candle to the glimmer in his kitten-blue eyes. Despite the feminine contour of his face, the inner core of hardy confidence that her father had long since lost shone through. His soft smile exuded a gentle warmth.

“Consider it a gift for a pretty little lady.”

“Thank you... Thank you very much.”

How long had it been since anyone had called her pretty as anything more than a nicety? She accepted the unfamiliar gentleman’s gift without much thought, but then began to observe him more carefully.

His well-tailored robe and long, gorgeous staff were the signs of a magus. The girl could tell at a glance that his soft garments had been sewn with expensive threads imported from the east. Clearly, he was of considerable stature.

“My apologies,” he said. “I forgot to introduce myself. I am Erich von Dalberg. I humbly serve the Trialist Empire’s Imperial College of Magic, where they have honored my lowly skills with the title of professor.”

Unbothered by the girl’s staring, Sir Erich von Dalberg bowed gracefully. The girl was baffled that he would treat someone like her with the respect of a noble, and it took a moment for her to catch her wits and return his introduction.

“I’m sorry,” the gentleman said. “I realize it isn’t proper to call out to you without speaking to your parents first, but you seemed so bored here by yourself.”

“Oh, um, that isn’t a problem at all, Sir Dalberg.”

“‘Erich’ will do, my lady.”

He smiled cheerfully and gently patted her on the head as praise for her good manners. The girl was thoroughly enjoying the unfamiliar sensation of a hand on her head until the man suddenly grumbled to himself in a cryptic tone.

“...I knew it.”

Perplexed, the girl traced his eyes to find that he was looking at the rose. She glanced at her hands only to discover that the paper had turned a deep blue before she knew it.

“Do you ever suffer from headaches, miss?”

Although the gentleman spoke unhurriedly, something about his tone suggested that he would not accept any lies. The girl answered frankly, and did so for the queries that followed too—she even spilled the details of her family’s

financial woes despite explicit orders not to do so.

Eventually, after asking a great many questions, the magus silently put a hand on his chin. He spent a moment in deep thought and then knelt down to speak to the girl at eye level. His gaze was an endless blue that threatened to swallow her whole.

“Would you like to apprentice under me, miss?”

All at once, the girl was shocked back into the present: something had tickled her. Focusing her eyes, she saw a papercraft butterfly—a favorite messenger of her master—had perched itself on her nose.

“Wha—hey! Get off!”

The young mage was embarrassed that she’d been too absorbed in her daydream to notice a message literally in front of her eyes; she swatted the living letter with a shout to dispel the lingering awkwardness.

However, the butterfly had inherited its creator’s habits of motion and easily dodged her hand, silently unfolding to present its contents. The letter had been written in her master’s obnoxiously perfect penmanship, but the lack of loathsome pleasantries usually found in aristocratic writings showed how fond he was of her. In their place, he’d apologized for his absence and asked her to join him on a short excursion.

She was to crumple the paper if she had other plans, but otherwise he would pick her up in two hours’ time.

“Gosh! You never tell me these things beforehand!”

For all her outward fury, the girl had a skip in her step and a smile on her face as she started to pack her bags.

[Tips] Most mages awaken to their powers once they attain a certain amount of mana. However, an overabundance can cause a breakdown in the standard process.

The Trialist Empire was home to several healing spas. As you might expect,

the one to drill into our few volcanic mountains and turn them into hot springs had been the Emperor of Creation who had founded Rhine in the first place. He'd declared that bathing was good for the body, and natural water even more so, spending his twilight years relaxing in the vacation spots he'd created. Nowadays, they were popular with people of every caste.

We had come to a southern resort renowned for spring water of both the bathing and drinking varieties. It was the sort of place a well-off commoner could reasonably afford to splurge on. After paying our dues, I gathered my bathing supplies in the lobby leading into the changing room.

"Goodness, your invitations are always so sudden." Although Margit initially sounded annoyed, she sat down beside me with a rapt grin. She had her own soap in hand and seemed perfectly ready to enjoy a nice bath—and while I don't think it needed to be said, the waters were not mixed.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought you could use the break."

"Oh, I very much could. Erich, the position you found me may pay handsomely, but I don't know if you realize how exhausting it is. One moment I'm to keep the fox population level, and the next I'm to gather wolves to release for the next hunting event. The good count never seems to run out of requests."

Margit shrugged to play up how demanding her work was, but I knew that she was doing fine. If nothing else, her employer appreciated her so much that he proudly introduced her to his hunting mates as "the keeper of my grove."

"And on top of that..." She tested me with a sideways glance and sultry sigh. "Everyone around me seems so concerned about when I'll find a husband and rear a successor."

Look, I know—I *know*. But if I may defend myself, I hadn't left Margit waiting. In fact, I couldn't think of any unnecessary detours I'd taken on my path home to get her. But when I'd arrived in Konigstuhl, she'd sidestepped my proposal by saying, "Oh, but being a nobleman's wife would be so stuffy. I could never."

So, while she agreed to join me on our adventures, we'd dragged on our comfortable distance into our late twenties. No one had yet mocked us as unwanted and unwed on account of our impressive careers, but the pressure

was starting to ramp up. Still, I couldn't bring myself to force her into a position I knew she wouldn't fit, so I was just as much to blame.

"Of course, it wouldn't be so problematic if I had *some way* of hushing them up..." Margit leaned over the table with a fanged smile.

"Hey there, you two look like you're having fun." Out of nowhere, Mika showed up and popped in between us.

"Oh, Mika," I said. "Finally here?"

"My," Margit said, "it has been some time, von Sponheim."

"Thanks to your space-bending portal," Mika said to me. "And Margit, can't you call me Mika, at least while we're here? This sort of retreat is one of the few chances I get to drop the stuffy formalities."

Mika casually took a seat between us. They were wearing a simple dress in place of their usual robe—a few years ago, they'd started dressing in both men's and women's clothing when between sexes—but failed to cover up their inherent class. Naturally, our party's deft debuffer was well acquainted with our capable arachne scout.

The two of them sort of got along and sort of didn't, though I'd noted that the air between them occasionally felt strangely enchanting. I'd tried probing the topic over drinks once, only for Margit to respond, "Not every venue is suited for a gentleman, you know?"

That night, I had decided that some questions men were better off not asking, especially when it concerned two women. Margit never made any comments when Mika and I goofed off like a pair of stupid boys, so I figured this was just one of those unspoken rules that helped keep a group of friends running smoothly.

"Boy, this sure is a nice place," Mika said. "Someone was selling drinks on my way here. Do you think they're any good?"

"We sampled some not too long ago," Margit replied. "The refreshments have a wonderful tinge of salt to them. I hear that this inn customarily serves their drinks with sweet pastries."

“Ooh! That sounds great. I’ve been craving simpler sweets lately. I hate the trend these days of trying to make desserts more luxurious by adding more sugar; this’ll make a great break for my tongue.”

See? Their maidenlike small talk had already begun. Our synergy as a full party was nothing short of perfect, so I didn’t mind being left out on occasion.

Speaking of which, it was about time to open up another portal. My student knew how things went, so the fact that my letter hadn’t been thrown in the trash meant she’d decided to join us on today’s field trip.

Margit and Mika both loved doting on her, so she was sure to learn a lot of vital lessons for any magus-in-training: close-quarters combat, detecting pursuants, recognizing poison, first aid...the list went on.

Every first-rate magus needed ten people with two pairs of hands just to *begin* counting the number of people after their life. Some came after valuable field samples, others tried to silence meddlesome publications, and still others wanted to steal the glory of an impressive breakthrough. Regardless of reason, one’s enemies grew in number as they climbed the social ladder.

I wanted my student to spend her youth having fun and learning important lessons—just like I had.

“Oh, it looks like your apprentice is here,” Mika said. “All right, let’s hop in the bath. Want me to wash your hair, Erich?”

“And what makes you think you can waltz into the same tub as him?” Margit retorted. “I should think a maiden so aptly dressed would join me in the women’s bath.”

“I picked these clothes on a whim. I’m sexless right now, you know?”

“Stop that. You’ll frighten the gentlemen enjoying the water.”



I could hear my student's hurried footsteps grow closer as my companions bantered amongst themselves. My family would be on their way as soon as they finished all the household chores.

Tonight was going to be a fun night.

[Tips] Despite housing few volcanic regions, the Empire boasts a great number of bathing resorts.



Afterword

I dedicate this work to the esteemed readers who continue to enjoy these stories; the publishers and editors that helped me release yet another volume; the masterful Lansane who consistently elevates the text with their stunning illustrations; and to my dear grandmother enjoying her interminable vacation.

This is my third opportunity to draft a rather stylistically Western afterword—by which I mean to say that I have been granted the honor of a third volume. While not quite as long-running as my beloved *A Tale of Mace and Gun*, I have now written as many works as there are core rulebooks for a game set in a certain sharp-edged world. And the universe in which impromptu alliances are turned into dice to physically beat down the enemy with only has one base rulebook, putting me ahead.

Jokes aside, the barrier of a third volume is a far larger hurdle to leap than that of a second, and it truly surprises me that the work was published in spite of the viral state of the world. While I know not whether I can clear the ever-growing hurdle of a fourth entry in this series, I struggle to find the right words to thank everyone who has joined me on the journey thus far.

Knowing this volume will release at the end of January, I am floored by the magnanimous souls who will spend precious parts of their days to purchase it in these trying times. Like the first volume, the circumstances around the release may give me an external justification for any potential poor showing; however, this series has an unexplainable one-to-one ratio when it comes to physical-to-digital sales, muddying the validity of such an excuse. I hear most works clock in at three-to-one or four-to-one ratios, so I thought I'd failed a perception check when I'd first asked for the statistics.

Between the publication of the second and third volumes, the web novel has surpassed twenty million total page views. The first volume has over two hundred Amazon reviews, the second has over one hundred, and unbelievably enough, the November sale saw the Kindle version place second among Overlap

Bunko's recent releases. At this point, I'm starting to feel the need to roll 1D100 just to make sure this isn't all a dream.

Of course, a tabletop gamer's sanity is wanting as is, so perhaps I'm already a lost cause.

At any rate, this volume does not contain any major plot differences; I instead opted to make sweeping revisions to the text while retaining the web novel's story beats.

Any opportunity to add more would allow my incessant compulsion to follow every sentence with another of its kind to go unchecked, and this arc wrapped up very neatly without any overhauls, so this is for the best. Even so, I have added or revised around fifty thousand characters in the hope that online readers will be able to enjoy a fresh read.

With this volume comes the long-awaited Mr./Ms./Mx. Mika. At once man, woman, and neither, a friend so all-encompassing almost seems suspect. His relatability through fraternity combined with her tenderness of the fairer sex is packaged in the body of a powerful mage, and Lansane's masterwork in bringing their allure to life leaves me absolutely stunned.

Their work on the knees and hips is especially remarkable: even the most skilled cross-dressers find camouflaging these parts of the body an insurmountable challenge. Seeing my portrayals so thoroughly understood and rendered leaves me unable to suppress my gratitude.

As of now, Mika is still young and unable to command the unique social position of sexual fluidity, but they will make better use of their alternating gender as time goes on. This is far into the future: as of the time of writing in December, they have only just begun to do so in the web novel.

The third volume failed to reach Erich's reaction to Mika's first shift or their rewards for clearing an ichor maze, so the details will have to wait for the next entry in the series. Volume four will also introduce a timeless fantasy race as enthralling as they are terrifying, so I sincerely hope to deliver another sequel.

With all that said, the current state of the world has made it terribly difficult to play TRPGs. It is a sad time when my friends have to close down—albeit temporarily—the tabletop convention they have run for so long. College clubs

can't recruit new members or offer sit-in sessions without endangering those involved, and I lost my annual opportunity to visit my alma mater when they canceled their school festival.

Yet in spite of it all, the tabletop community remains strong. I purchased tons of apocrypha—er, I mean supplements that came out this year, and many classic titles were remastered into deluxe editions. With all the new programs and tools that have come out to support online sessions, perhaps one day I might have the honor of sitting at a virtual table with readers of this series.

Well... I say that, but my schedule this year has been so packed that I haven't had any time to actually *play* a tabletop game—traditional board games included. I've bought a great number of the latter, but sadly, the best I've managed all year has been to read through the rulebooks alone and gawk at the pretty pieces.

Living in a world where safety is interlinked with solitude is painful, but no night is without its dawn. Just as every storm cedes to sunlight eventually, I believe we will one day be able to sit around our tables and laugh ourselves to tears. Sometimes my 2D6 rolls average a five and boxcars only show up to kill my players as the GM, but the magical sessions that make me want to scribble out a replay are always waiting on ahead. I'm sure our joyful days are waiting with them.

I would like to close out this afterword with an earnest wish: I pray to meet you again in volume four, and for us to return to our tables safe and healthy.

That said, I hope to see you again in the next session. Make sure to bring your character sheets. With any luck, the GM will remember to bring the USB with the campaign's scenario on it.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as “extra replays” and “rulebook fragments.”

Congratulations
on Volume 3!



Elisa didn't get any
illustrations, so
here she is.

Angie



Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane

3

Henderson Scale

The “Henderson” referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.

Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.

She hugged
us with her
transparent
yet strangely
warm arms,
burying both of
us in what I now
realized was a
prodigious
chest.

“I’m so sorry,
little ones.
Did I frighten
you?”

Leizniz

Agrippina





Ah, drat...
he's toying
with me.

“Hey, what are
you doing?”

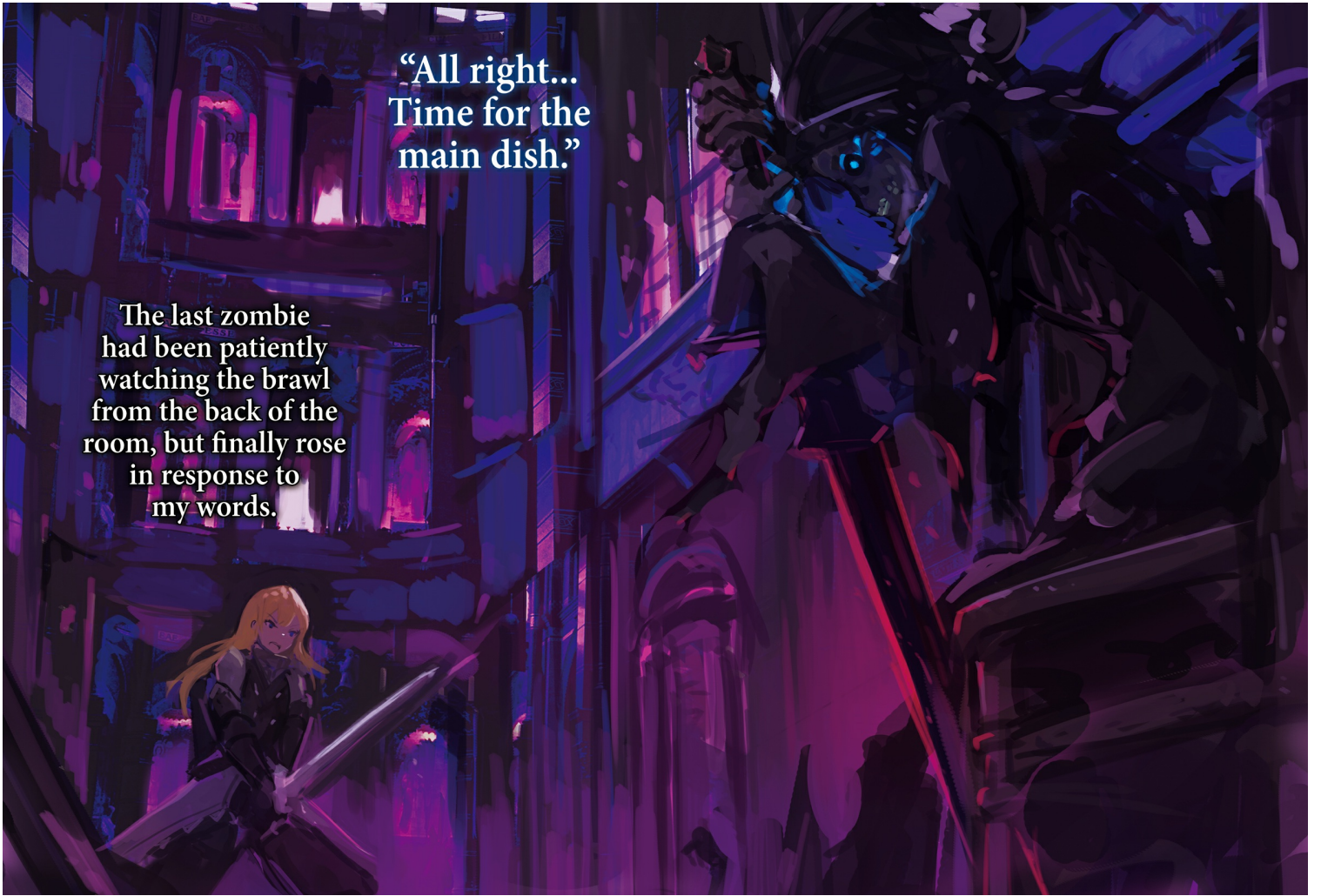
“Come on, my
hands are empty
and I like how
your hair feels.”

Erich

Mika

“All right...
Time for the
main dish.”

The last zombie
had been patiently
watching the brawl
from the back of the
room, but finally rose
in response to
my words.



CHARACTER

Name

Magdalena
von Leizniz

Race

Wraith

Classification

Enemy

Specialties

[REDACTED]

Skills

[REDACTED]

Traits

- ◆ Deathly Life
- ◆ Frozen [REDACTED]
- ◆ [REDACTED]



CHARACTER

Name

Mika

Race

Tivisco

Position

Mage

Specialties

Mana Capacity VII

Skills

- ◆ Novice Oikodomurgy
- ◆ Intermediate Oikodomurgy

Traits

- ◆ Indivisible Duality
- ◆ Androgynous Beauty



Bonus Short Stories

The Wraith's Afternoon Leisure

Every professor at the Imperial College of Magic enjoyed considerable privileges; among these was an atelier so large that a researcher's workshop couldn't even begin to compare.

Each of these elite magia had a massive amount of space in the bedrock underneath Krahenschanzeto fill with personal rooms and storehouses. A full studio was comparable to a small mansion—though the fussier of highborn professors derided their studios as mere chicken coops.

It followed that the founder of the prosperous Daybreak faction's largest cadre, Professor Madalena von Leizniz herself, had one such sanctuary. And as a matter of course, she had dedicated one of her many rooms to suit a very personal purpose indeed.

"Ugh... Every day is so exhausting..."

Leizniz had just returned from yet another morning class on thaumic fundamentals in front of a massive, packed lecture hall. She was to teach another set of students in the evening, and she'd decided to spend her midday break in her own abode. Despite her two centuries of experience as an instructor, repeating the same topic twice in one day was always difficult; thus, she had determined that a bit of mental nourishment was in order.

Wraiths were closer to living phenomena than their peers, even amongst the unliving. They had no need for food, drink, or sleep, naturally; they had no body that would necessitate such things, instead merely branded their existence onto the world with their ceaseless mana output. However, that did little to change their minds. Habits learned in life proved difficult to forget, and the history books contained records of wraiths longing for an end to their eternal lives all for the inability to sleep.

To live an honest life—an expression that was somewhat defective in this case

—Leizniz required some sort of emotional sustenance to replace basic mortal needs.

“Heh heh heh heh...”

Such was this room. Its physical make was second only to her all-important laboratory, and she’d erected mystic barriers to protect a display room valuable only to someone with her particular inclinations.

A gallery of rows upon rows of dolled-up corpses of pretty and pretty girls...did *not* line the walls. In their places hung an array of portraits depicting the golden days of their youth. Everything from massive oil paintings to simple sketches scrawled on parchment had its place. The overwhelming density of art spoke to the woman’s manic obsession with immortalizing any slice of beauty she deemed worthy.

“So wonderful,” she sighed. “So very wonderful... I can feel the beauty seep into my soul.”

Surrounded by all that she loved most, the undead professor took a deep breath to soak in the smell of contentment the room produced. She had nothing to breathe *with*, of course, but going through the motions helped her feel closer to the marvelous past the paintings represented—as evidenced by her enthralled expression. The memories advanced from old to new as one walked deeper into the hall, and Leizniz took her time drifting down her treasure trove.

Most of the pieces near the entrance depicted cats and dogs. A few showed either old schoolmates who had long since left the College or sworn friends now enjoying eternal rest carrying the little pets. In the beginning, her hobby had begun as a way of soothing her weary heart by gazing at cute creatures and the colleagues that had been by her side before she passed.

Just a bit deeper hung the first painting of a lone figure: a bashful young girl in a brand new robe, clearly unused to posing. On both sides of her stood old classmates who had grown much taller since the paintings where they’d appeared with cats in their arms.

This girl had been Leizniz’s first disciple—a joint apprentice shared with her colleagues. Shortly after ascending to the rank of professor, she had lacked the

confidence to take charge of a protégé, especially with her physical condition. Her fellow professors had offered to join her, only for them to all end up fighting over who got to doll up their students instead.

Thinking back, this had probably been where it had all started. Excited by her first student, Leizniz had used her ample salary to test any and every piece of clothing on the girl.

The still lifes of people grew in number until the animals eventually disappeared. Although she still loved cats and dogs, nothing was as fun as dressing up a person. The children in the frames grew with passage: most first appearances were at age five or so and continued to the student's midteens. Even now, Leizniz could recall their names and stories without skipping a beat.

Her first apprentice was Michaela von Bloomberg. She had become a researcher, but then fell in love and left the College to marry.

Her second apprentice was Aloysia von Marsbaden. She too had been shy of attaining professorship, but Leizniz remembered celebrating her treatise's addition to the Imperial Library like it had been yesterday.

After a few more girls, boys began to adorn the walls. About half a century after her resurrection as a wraith, Leizniz had found herself terribly jealous of a boy who got along with her then-disciple, until thinking to herself, *Wait... What if I dress him up too?* She'd then prettied the two up as a pair, and the rest was history.

Liesel and Edgar. The adorable young couple smiled back from upon the canvas. As anachronistic as it was, the portrait beside them showed their beautiful son; in a strange turn of fate, he, too, had apprenticed under Leizniz.

Next came Christhard, Miriam, Saskia, then Reimer. The dazzling memories stored in these bygone visages cradled the woman's heart. Some of her students had gone on to become rather vain, and the statues and busts that periodically interspersed the paintings were just as filling to her soul.

At long last, Leizniz came to the empty end of the hall. A spell of hers left it stretching far beyond the last lonely portrait, but as she stood and stared, she let out an intoxicated sigh.

A little blonde girl sat on a chair with a stiff expression; beside her, a young boy doted on her with a soft smile.

This oilwork of a brother and sister from Konigstuhl was Leizniz's current favorite. The painting itself was of particular excellence, and the love of siblinghood that oozed from the brushstrokes was a precious treasure she had not yet had a chance to behold.

Novelty and cuteness were the best nutrition for her tired spirit. Elongating mortal life was yet a pipe dream, but one day, the unhinged wraith swore, she would find a way.

Soon, their new outfits would be tailored. They were sure to pair gorgeously with their dazzling golden locks. That thought alone was enough to get the immortal professor through her evening chores.

Still, she couldn't help wishing for some new kind of stimulation... In due time, Leizniz would realize that she had yet to try pairing a boy with another boy, but that was a tale for another day.

As her motionless heart fluttered at a future yet unseen, someone somewhere far away began to violently sneeze.

[Tips] Wraiths can, to some degree, mimic their actions from before death.

Like the Actors Onstage

I enjoyed a stroke of good fortune today, and I decided to invite my friend to join me.

"A play?" Erich asked.

"That's right," I said. "My master gave me these and said I need to take a break sometimes."

The two vouchers I had in hand were a reward for an especially well-written essay. My master had given them to me expecting I'd take a friend, but it was only recently that this sort of kindness had become easy to accept.

Nowadays, I had someone to invite. Not having to sit by a spot left empty

from an unused ticket was such a blessed feeling.

“Are you sure?” Erich asked as he prepared some red tea in his kitchen. “Tickets to a play don’t come cheap.”

“It isn’t a fancy theater or anything. I wouldn’t have even accepted these if they were for a magic lantern show, but they’re for a more casual place.”

I showed him the tickets to ease his fears: there were two imperial theaters granted to the public by the crown, and these were for one of them. Even commoners could enjoy a performance there if they were willing to save up a bit.

To begin with, I wasn’t brave enough to try and watch a show put on by aristocrats for social purposes, or set foot in the kind of auditorium reserved for state-sponsored opera crews to entertain foreign diplomats. Wearing my everyday robe would get me kicked out for being an eyesore anyway.

Our destination came with far less anxiety. We would never go on our own dime, since we’d need to cough up silver pieces, but acting brought sagas to life more than a lone minstrel could. Erich and I had similar tastes; I had a feeling he’d appreciate the play they were putting on.

“Oh, it’s the saga of Jeremias and the Holy Sword!”

“That’s right,” I nodded. “It’s the second act—The Falls of Mourning. Pretty cool, huh?”

The story followed Jeremias as he received a sword and mission from the heavens. Persecuted as a heretic in a foreign land, he set off on an odyssey to save his disgraced god. The popular tale arose from events that had occurred in the short period between the Age of Gods and Age of Antiquity, and the second act was particularly well-known in the long, multipart epic.

“It really is,” he agreed. “I’m imagining the way my brother’ll just *writhe* with envy when I write to him about it.”

Ticket in hand, my friend began to recount his childhood memories with a great big smile. Apparently, his older brother had always wanted to lead their party as Jeremias whenever they played adventurers.

“O God, mine eye I render gladly to the rapids should it lift a thimble’s weight of sorrow from your daughter’s soul. Guilt take thee not, for this is mine own will.”

Erich pretended to gouge an eye as he put verse to sonorous melody. Jeremias was said to be a black-haired mammoth of a man, so he didn’t fit the part with his shining golden hair; still, his acting was quite something.

The heroine of the tale was a saint serving a foreign deity, to whom Jeremias offered his eye to free the woman of a curse. Taken by his self-sacrifice, she asked to accompany him on his journey; the scene was exceptionally famous for the moment she swore in her heart that she would spend the rest of her life repaying him.

I responded with a snippet from the saint’s soliloquy: “If ever harmed he be, I am his shield always. If night should rob his will, I am his warmth. If hardship rears its head, I stand with him beside. Not life of mine nor heart makes fair his missing eye.”

Her oath remained forever unspoken: she simply offered to join him for a time as a minor repayment for his kindness. Through their short time together, the saint had seen through Jeremias’s morality. Although she considered herself no more than a pawn whose greatest worth was to die for his sake, she realized that to say that aloud would cause the hero to slip away in the night to prevent her from spending her precious life on him.

What a heartrending way to love.

Perhaps one day I too would come to understand what let her throw herself into the raging ocean without hesitation.

For a while, we bandied lines back and forth. I would have died of shame had these not been excerpts from a poem, but as it stood, it was all fun and games.

Come to think of it, there had been a boy in my own hometown who’d gotten a little too wrapped up in his Jeremias act. He’d always worn an eyepatch even though he hadn’t needed it, and he’d only stopped when his dubious depth perception led him to tumble straight into a vat of fertilizer.

Listening to the stories was well and good, but showy looks were best suited

to fiction. In that sense, maybe that boy had been lucky to learn his lesson so young. If someone were to ask me to wear the outfits actors wore on stage at my age...I would probably die of disgrace.

“Man, I’m really looking forward to this.”

“Me too. I don’t think I could ever *wear* any of that stage costuming, but seeing them is a lot of fun.” I laughed and added, “It must take a lot of confidence to go out in *public* wearing something like that, huh?”

However, my comment didn’t quite get the desired response... In fact, I had never seen Erich make the face he was making now. It was somewhere between a frown and mourning: his lips pursed like he’d eaten something sour, and his eyes glanced away like he had something to hide.

“Er... Old pal?” I asked. “Did I say something weird?”

“No, uh, well—it isn’t your fault... Just forget about it.”

That’s a tall order, I thought.

I tried a few more times to see if I could do anything to help him with his troubles, but he kept insisting that there wasn’t anything wrong with a half-hearted smile.

Uh... Hrm... I wonder what got under his skin?

Erich was still trying to lift himself up by talking about how excited he was for the play. For now, I figured the best I could do was treat him to dinner.

[Tips] Plays performed on stage instead of in open-air public spaces are considered a luxury among the common folk of the Empire.

An Ashen Soliloquy

I like the cool scent of morning. It means my diligent tenant is close to waking; it marks the beginning of a new day.

I like the ice-cold well water. It makes my hands feel like they’ll crack, but that’s perfect to start working; it marks the beginning of a new day.

I like the sound of my knife on a cutting board. My tenants can't hear me, but this is the sound that guides them to waking.

The rolling boil of beans in a short pan. The sizzling of an egg right beside. The whistling of the kettle for a pot of red tea. I like all of these sounds.

But my favorite sound of all is the creaking staircase. That's the sound of my hardworking tenant coming down from his bedroom to start his day.

But today he hasn't come down, even though I'm already cutting the black bread into thin slices. I can hear anything in this house from anywhere, so I listen...and hear him snoozing.

Come to think of it, he came home late last night. Maybe he's tired.

I go upstairs to find that he really is tired—he's still sleeping. But his breathing is shallow. He's probably half of the way to waking up and is just clinging to the warmth of his sheets.

I like the window and the rays of dawn shining through it. They bounce off his golden hair to make another sun indoors.

I like his gentle breathing. It's proof that he's cozy in the bed I made.

I want to let him keep sleeping, but I can't; he has work to do. I don't know the outside world, but I heard him mutter about how servants don't have any time to themselves. I have to wake him up.

Besides, I had readied a pail of water for when he always wakes up. I don't want it to go cold. It's better for him to wash his face before it does. I even went out of my way to put herbs in the bucket, so I want him to enjoy it at its best.

I gently rock his shoulder and he moans quietly. I secretly put a bit of honey on his lips during the night so the dry autumn air won't crack them.

Is he still asleep? I try again by poking his cheek. It's very soft. I know most like his hair, but I think to myself that his cheek is nice too.

He finally finds the willpower to crawl out of the covers. He opens his eyes and pulls off his blanket. He stretches and sits up and lets out a great big yawn.

I hurry to the stairwell to not be seen. As I do, I hear a word of thanks.

Oh, I know I'm not supposed to accept too much gratitude, but I can't help it when he's so nice. Silkies aren't supposed to accept praise from the tenants we care for. We're not supposed to take candies that they forget on purpose either.

And worst of all, we're not supposed to be happy when someone names us the Ashen Fraulein.

I'm supposed to get a little bit angry and scold him.

Alfar have rules to follow. We follow these rules out of instinct, and we can't break them if we want to stay in the world. They help make up the core of our being, and they're supposed to bind us so tightly that we can't resist.

Ah, but maybe I'm soft on him because he's our Beloved One.

The sound of the creaking staircase officially heralds a new day. He comes down freshly dressed.

Warm breakfast lines the table—I can't believe people of this country can eat *cold* food!—and he sits down. He eats so neatly that it makes me happy to cook.

He was sloppy when he first moved in, but he perfected his table manners before I knew it. The way he handles his silverware is like an elegant prince. He carefully chews every bite and is careful not to get his mouth dirty. Seeing him perfectly clean the whole plate makes me feel very pleased.

Nothing can make a cook happier than having someone finish a whole meal.

I pour him the red tea I've been keeping warm in the pot after his meal. He drinks it and says that the food was good. He makes sure to speak to himself in a way that anyone else in the room can hear.

This is allowed. The way he tiptoes around our rules shows how truly kind he is.

Every now and again, I see mensch try and talk to fairies on mortal terms. Sometimes we get angry. Other times...they mistake my actions for courtship and I have to expel them. The unmannered persons who once lived here are perfect examples.

Oh, but he is such a good boy—so good that I want him to stay here forever.

But you know, I can't help it. I know he'll leave one day, but sometimes I wish I could keep him this way for all of time.

This fey desire is one I can't deny. Hair and eyes are pretty, but we can't help but be drawn to those who treat us well. So much so that I'm a little bit jealous of my sistren dancing with their favorite boys and girls on the twilight hill at the back of my mind.

But I have to fight the urge. Serving honest tenants and protecting their homes is a silkie's job.

Besides...I think he's prettier living his life like this than dancing for all of eternity.

"Thank you, Ashen Fraulein, for your kindness and the wonderful meal."

These words are supposed to vex me, but I can't help but be happy. They linger long after they're said, and I chew on them as I lap up the delicious sweet cream on the stove.

I smile. I wonder what I should make for dinner...

[Tips] Attempts to excessively praise or honor a silkie can trigger unbridled fury.

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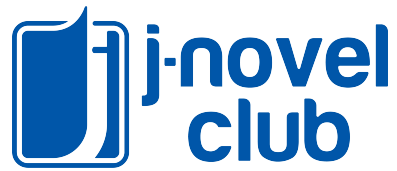
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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 3

by Schuld

Translated by Mikey N.

Edited by Will Holcomb

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